Introduction

Despite a frequent tendency in the writing of the history of war to focus on a legend of a victorious general, or to view a decisive battle as a validation of national exceptionalism, Carl von Clausewitz posited the idea that in war, no result is ever final. In the event, the record of soldiers (and civilians, in this case, to be sure) in their variety who constitute the character of an army in a state and society or within the international system of alliances and coalitions becomes obscured or risks being condemned to caricature. In this regard, the story of any army in war and that of its soldiers comprises vastly more than simply the account of a single battle, for armies often pass through a cycle of victory, defeat, and regeneration, and new purpose. War – and in the case of France, occupation – also places societies under strain, pushes them into uncharted regions which require a new vocabulary and an altered language to express the misery, pain, humiliation, and bewilderment over a sense of altered certainties and shattered convictions. This generalization is especially germane to the story of the French Army and its soldiers and civilians in defeat and victory as a feature of the French nation and its role in Europe and beyond since the seventeenth century, themes which have been the subject of this author's scholarship for fifty years. In this regard, the French Army in the whole of the Second World War, its prelude and its aftermath, is a story that deserves a clear rendering in its extraordinary detail and complexity – the purpose of these two volumes.

The task to offer a comprehensive account of France for the Cambridge University Press series on Armies of the Second World War poses a significant challenge of chronology, cause and effect, and judgment, as well as the effort to cut through the myth, legend, and prejudice that too often characterize popular perceptions of France at war. This task starts with the fact that France's participation in the war, from say its prelude in 1936 through 1939 and onto the spring of 1945, fails to fit the pattern that might be said to adhere to such other major belligerents. Instead, the standard story of France in the Second World War as it now stands is segmented into distinct and often disjointed episodes, beginning with

Anglo-French appeasement of the 1930s, transiting through the Phoney War in 1939–1940, and culminating in the stunning and humiliating "strange defeat" of May–June 1940. This by itself has inspired several generations of robust and evolving historical forensics which of late have invited counterfactual speculation about alternative outcomes, in themselves often linked to the neurotics of decline via a cult of the past, and the nostalgia, even sentimentality, that has come to characterize much popular history of the Second World War. These will be dealt with in the conclusion to volume two of this work. At this point, the English-speaking scholarship of France's post-1940 presence in the war is largely reduced to cameo appearances of little explanatory power here and there such as Operation Torch, the November 1942 invasion of French North Africa, and the breakthrough at Monte Cassino in May–June 1944, spearheaded by the *Corps expéditionnaire français*. Here legend often obscures the truth visible in the best and most recent scholarship that breaks with fads, sentimentality, and a seemingly insatiable need to transform common men and women into heroes. This trend has been most apparent in France in a movement often referred to as "The French Resistance," more as a myth at the time and since, spontaneously generated inside the country to assume a vital role in the crumbling of the Occupation. While interesting as a phenomenon of wartime society in the face of Axis Europe, as well as the dictates of national reconstruction in the Fourth and Fifth Republics, internal resistance offers little more than a footnote to the war, although heavily romanticized at the time and since as the "Armies of the Shadows," and other melodramatic renderings. In addition to my work of 2013 on the ill effects of counterinsurgency in Western democracies, this work also aspires to demonstrate how this "resistance myth" laid a foundation, both intellectual and institutional, for the post-11 September 2001 craze for special operations as the highest expression of military organization and the sublime form of grand strategy.[1] The year 1944 witnessed the Liberation of France by Anglo-American armies, with Charles de Gaulle taking power in a flamboyant and highly mythologized manner during the August deliverance of Paris, leaving the final conquest of Germany to British, US, and Soviet armies – this is at best an incomplete misperception which this work attempts to correct in detail.

This customary fragmentation of France's Second World War story is, in my view, both inaccurate and, given the impressive expansion of especially French-language current research little known in the United States or the United Kingdom on the many aspects of France at war, also obsolete. Far too much attention is given to the legends of 1940 as the opening shot of the war in the West which established Axis domination of the European Continent, agonizingly reversed at enormous costs of

suffering and death over the next five years. In this view, for France and the West, the 1940 battle of France became the war's culminating event, serving in the shadow of the Cold War as a sort of a cautionary lesson, along with the perils of appeasement, of the requirement for moral rearmament. Nonetheless, the 1940 armistice does not transform France into mere bystander and suffering victim of that war's larger course of events. In fact, like the other Allied powers who experienced initial battlefield setbacks – Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States – France struggled to reconstruct its military power within the context of a global conflict. However, the nation and its army faced numerous handicaps, beginning with the fact that the armed forces were broken into warring fragments, while the country was occupied by Axis forces, which made reconstitution and renewing the fight doubly difficult. Unlike the other major Allied nations, Vichy French and Free French offered very different diagnoses of the causes of the debacle determined by ideology and long-standing frictions in politics, society, and the army itself, on what form France's military rehabilitation should take, and to what political and strategic ends French military power should be directed. Much of France's army of 1940 was incarcerated as POWs in Germany, so that military strength must be refashioned largely from the manpower of France's underdeveloped colonial empire, or internally from a civilian *levée*. This process forms a central part of this work and it is a story poorly understood in the English-speaking world.

These two volumes aspire to correct the skewed periodization and a distorted emphasis on the heretofore distinct episodes or ancillary events that compose France's wartime storyline, one that operated in many domains little prone to the customary chronology and cause and effect. This work breaks new ground to unify the many disparate realms of the conflict and the institution of the French military broadly defined, the French nation in its fractures, and the many fields in which French soldiers, sailors, and civilian resisters proceed over a longer period of time than as found in conventional histories on the topic that pivot too much on the early summer of 1940 and suddenly burst again into view in June 1944. This study goes beyond the "decisive battle" military history literature with its focus on "the Fall of France," to establish a narrative sweep of France at war within the international system, in Europe, Africa, and beyond, to include society and the respective political camps so central to French life and identity. Plainly, the story conceived in this more expansive and variegated framework does not finish in the newsreel scenes of the dining car at Compiègne in which figures in *Wehrmacht* field gray dwarf the handful of French officers. Rather, these books seek to address the military and the war in its totality, to follow France's post-June 1940 attempts to regenerate military power in its many guises and across political divisions, both at home and in the empire. These volumes follow the fate of soldiers in their diversity as they proceed through the years after June 1940, most of which has received entirely too little attention in the Second World War's grand chronicle. This work is also attentive to the full variety of France's wartime experience, seeking to incorporate those omitted from traditional descriptions of the war – POWs, women, civilians-in-arms, colonial subjects, foreign refugees – and to recall that much of the Second World War was fought outside of Europe, and by many non-European peoples. The simple fact is that France did not exit the war with the signing of the June 1940 armistice. But the effort to reconstitute French military power crumbled into Vichy collaboration, Alsace-Moselle occupation struggles, the mobilization of French North Africa, and the endeavors – some might say the antics of Charles de Gaulle as seen by skeptics in the year 1941 or 1942 – of "the squatter on the shores of the Thames," a man who appeared somewhat incongruous to Churchill and FDR, but who in France was perceived as noble, and of the French in exile within the Anglo-Saxon alliance.

1 France in the Age of Total War

As the revisionist powers shifted the European security order in the years after 1933, the public assigned blame to the imperfect peace signed with Germany on 28 June 1919 at Versailles, followed by treaties signed with Austria at Saint-Germain, and Hungary at the Trianon. Summing up the century, *The Economist* condemned the Versailles agreement as "the final crime . . . whose harsh terms would ensure a second war."[1] As Canadian historian Margaret Macmillan notes, however, Hitler did not go to war in September 1939 because of the Versailles Treaty, although the burden of sole war guilt, disarmament, reparations, and occupation in the pact furnished a legend of martyrdom under the swastika. Though defeated on the western battlefields in the summer and fall of 1918 and temporarily immobilized by the revolution in 1919, a Germany that had internalized many of Erich Ludendorff and Walter Rathenau's principles of policy and strategy remained exceptionally powerful in Europe – a fact that became obvious after the stabilization of 1924 and Gustav Stresemann's reintegration of Germany into Western Europe in the years thereafter. The Great War had unleashed too many forces in the European system and radicalized the domestic politics of Central and Eastern Europe, to say nothing of a Western Europe exhausted by war, to be contained by the precarious post-war international collective security scaffolding erected in Paris's royal suburbs. In the wreckage of the Hohenzollern, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires and elsewhere, Woodrow Wilson's "national self-determination, that noble ideal, produced dreadful offspring when it was wedded to ethnic nationalism." The architects of the Versailles peace – Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George – soon passed from the diplomatic stage as the disorder of an incomplete peace manifested itself in the discord of the victors and the unbroken will to fight of the vanquished. In November 1919, the US Senate refused both to ratify the agreement and to join the League of Nations, and gutted the Covenant of the League. Consequently, the League's concept of collective security proved unable to meet the dangerous effects of the failing peace once the Great War's victors surrendered the initiative in the decade of the 1930s.

Nor could French statecraft of alliance and containment in Western and Central Europe endure without ample backing from the Anglo-Saxon victors and in the face of German, Italian, and Soviet power. This American defection from European security in anything but a disjointed commercial role compounded the discord among the victors. (The Dawes and Young plans as well as the fairyland diplomacy of forbidding war had been underpinned with petty fogging macroeconomic ideas of balanced budgets and the reparations puzzle.) This disarticulation of statecraft deprived the post-Great War security order of many of the tools required to deal with large and difficult questions of national minorities in new nation states and the inevitable revival of aggression and militarism in Central Europe in a new style of diplomacy and conflict which makers of statecraft in the 1920s could only poorly answer in policy and strategy.[2]

By far the largest and most challenging Great War legacy in an epoch that came to be described by Ludendorff's term total war confronted civilians, soldiers, diplomats, and policymakers with this question: "whether and how modern war among highly industrialized nations was still possible as an instrument of policy." The destructive capacities of all-azimuths propaganda for boundless war goals, bombing aircraft, long-range, high-explosive artillery, poison gas, and submarine torpedoes exceeded the limited political objectives on a mid-nineteenth-century model that war was meant to achieve – these had been quickly swept aside by warfare on a scale that obliterated the traditional roles of armies, generals, admirals, combatant societies and ministries and courts to give some coherence to combat. "Warfare had become total war, affecting all aspects of the social and political life of the belligerents."[3] From the moment that he had been named Hindenburg's chief of staff in 1916 in the advent of the Third Army Supreme Command, Erich Ludendorff "became an advocate of 'what may be called a technical dictatorship for the purposes of the conduct of mass warfare' or what we more commonly call a technocratic rule," writes Michael Geyer. Ludendorff's concept of total war sought to harness the political, economic, and social dynamic of the nation to "engulf all of society in an ever-expanding machine of violence." Needless to say, Ludendorff's "total war" concepts reconfigured civil–military relations in Germany in a manner that the makers of peace struggled to comprehend fully in 1919, but which Ludendorff spent years enumerating in his incessant publications until his death in 1937. "Machine warfare was fought best by soldiers fortified by propaganda and backed up by an ideologically unified nation." Clausewitz's view of war as a political act became the first casualty of Ludendorff's "expanding and escalating the use of force" in which strategy was reduced to a form of social and technocratic mobilization as embodied in the second industrial revolution and the union of general staff and heavy industry management. This became reflected in escalating war aims via the *Vaterlandspartei* on the need to "purify" one's own society as a prelude to dominating that of the enemy. In Ludendorff's total war vision, soldiers no longer employed their expertise to achieve limited foreign policy objectives while containing inevitable losses. Hitler and the National Socialists eagerly took up Ludendorff's vision of "national purification through conquest or, as we have called it apocalyptic war . . . [as] the first step in creating a new German master race . . ."[4]

In his second book of 1928 and in his first meeting with the heads of the military in February 1933 once he became chancellor, Hitler expounded his view not only that war offered a feasible option for Germany, but also that war offered a way of life central to national socialism and the party-state regime that emerged in 1933, and the only way to realize his vision of achieving national purification. Unlike Hitler and his disciples, most European military and political elites had no desire to re-experience Great War traumas.[5] This anxiety was especially the case in the France of the Third Republic, for which national survival had been purchased in 1914–1918 at the exorbitant cost of 1,300,000 casualties and the occupation of ten of France's most productive departments.[6] "There was no fundamental disagreement in France between military leaders and politicians or diplomats in the principles of French security policy during the inter-war period," concludes the German scholar of inter-war militaries and keen observer of the skepticism of professional soldiers about Nazi ideals of total war Klaus-Jürgen Müller. "Generally, accord and accommodation rather than dissent characterized the relationship" between soldiers and political leaders in France.[7] That "accord and accommodation" centered on the Third Republic's "traditional military credo" of a fortified eastern border, foreign alliances, and universal conscription.[8] While such policy may have created a temporary French dominance on the continent in the 1920s, by the 1930s European diplomacy encountered several limitations. First, with the epoch of the dictators at hand and with enduring generalized disarticulated policy in Paris, London, and Washington D.C., three of Europe's five major powers sought to overturn the post-Great War status quo. Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany were states ideologically committed to war, that, on the model of Soviet Russia, sought to deploy diplomacy to divide their enemies and better to position themselves for conflict when the time came to initiate it in what in the twenty-first century is called hybrid war, but was just as prominently a feature of totalitarian statecraft in this period of unrelenting conflict, subterfuge, mass persuasion, and intimidation. As early as 1933, Britain's ambassador to Berlin, Horace Rumbold, perceptively noted that Hitler's ultimate aim was the "creation of a militarized 'racial community' capable of waging wars of conquest." Nazism was "an ideology of war" in which "peace was regarded merely as preparation for war."[9] In equally significant measure, Stalin's outlook, driven by a Marxist-Leninist belief that war was an inevitable product of capitalist conflict, was more opaque. While Moscow was not looking to ignite a war, nor, plainly, was it committed to upholding the status quo hammered out at Versailles and its ancillary treaties. The Soviet dictator's conviction that the USSR was "encircled by enemies," i.e. especially the Poles and the Japanese, was confirmed in his mind by the Anti-Comintern Pact signed between Germany and Japan in 1936, which Mussolini joined the following year. Soviet intelligence bombarded Stalin with reports which nourished his paranoia. Meanwhile, the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, which might have offered a corrective, became a central target of Stalin's Great Terror from 1934 onwards. Those experienced and sometimes sensible Soviet diplomats with actual knowledge of the outside world were sidelined, arrested, and an estimated 20 percent of them were executed as the terror took hold in the late 1930s. Many critical Soviet diplomatic posts went unfilled. For Stalin, the fact that European powers had launched rearmament in the 1930s meant that they sought to acquire the "means by which to re-divide the world." Peter Jackson notes that for the Soviet Leader, diplomacy offered "a tool to help ensure that 'inevitable war' would take place under conditions favorable to the USSR."[10]

Burdened with the long-haul impact of the war on their empires and domestic politics and economy, Britain and France remained the two status quo powers, and French pre-war diplomatic efforts focused on replicating the *entente* of 1914–1918. As the horizon darkened as the 1930s unfolded, this task would prove an elusive and often frustrating one for Paris for several reasons of domestic and international character as well as concerning military affairs. First, the long shadow of the Great War and the Depression disinclined the leadership and populations of both countries to contemplate an encore against Hitler, especially as rearmament with mechanized weapons would undermine economic recovery. This hesitancy was accentuated in London by the conviction of anti-Soviet conservatives especially, that Britain had made a grave strategic error in joining the Grand Alliance with France and Russia in 1914. From this classic balance-of-power and maritime perspective, as a naval power backed by a vast empire, the question of who dominated the continent was not an issue worth the sacrifice of significant amounts of British blood and treasure. Seen by the lights of the twenty-first century and not that of the year 1935, at the time of the Anglo-German naval treaty which scuttled the Versailles disarmament clauses that had not already been scrapped, such arguments are easily refuted. And, indeed, "British strategy underwent a remarkable evolution" in the wake of the September 1938 Munich Conference, by not only abandoning a policy of "limited liability" on the Continent, but also subscribing to the French thesis that the security of Western Europe and that of Eastern Europe were linked, and demanded once more a continental commitment with ground and air forces if war came.[11]

A second problem for Neville Chamberlain, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer since 1931 and Prime Minister from 1937, was an acute awareness that mobilization for a "people's war" would require, in the words of Labour intellectual Harold Laski, a "socialist reconstruction, national and international." Such a "new world order" would propel the United States and perhaps the Soviet Union into the first rank of nations, severely debilitate the British economy, and possibly witness the dismantling of colonial empires that would diminish Britain's international status and require a remake of British identity. Chamberlain's compromise in the defense realm was to focus on the modernization of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force (RAF). "Chamberlain thus fiercely opposed proposals for a large-scale expansion of the army," notes Talbot Imlay, out of "fear of the financial, industrial and political price of creating a mass army." He recognized that mass mobilization "risked transforming the balance of industrial and political power in Great Britain."[12] Rather than lay the groundwork for a "people's war," the British Prime Minister opted to preserve the British army basically as a diminutive, regimentally structured colonial constabulary that was outclassed by the rapidly modernizing *Wehrmacht* and even the Soviet Army. The RAF, destined primarily to shield the British Isles from air attack, and the Royal Navy became the pillars of Home defense. But as Whitehall began to worry that French resolve might falter in the face of a resurgent Germany, from early 1939, the British army belatedly began to garner attention. But this effort became a forward deployed contingent – the BEF – which the *Wehrmacht* routed in the Spring 1940 campaign that resulted in the Fall of France.[13]

France's post-1919 security was anchored in "collective security," a mesh of conventions and arms control and arbitration arrangements based on the Covenant of the League and the Little Entente that pivoted on Central European nations whose ambition could not match their limited means. Naval conferences at Washington in 1922 followed eight years later by that in London sought to prevent a naval arms race. If diplomacy of security failed, then sanctions could be imposed on the offending party through the League of Nations. Collective security came under pressure, however, first when Japan started a war in Northern Asia in 1931, and, later, when Germany stormed out of the Geneva disarmament conference in October 1933, and along with Japan, left the League, followed by Italy four years later. This collapse of collective security and the strategic answers of the period 1919–1935 challenged France to come up with new ways to manage its security.[14]

The centerpiece of post-Great War French diplomacy had been the 1925 Locarno agreement, which guaranteed the western frontiers of France, Belgium, with which France struck a military alliance, and the Germany of Gustav Stresemann in the few placid years of the Weimar government. In an attempt to extend Locarno eastward, Paris concluded a military alliance with Poland. The Quai d'Orsay also negotiated supplementary political treaties with Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. These arrangements were sometimes disparaged by critics as "illusions of pactomania" which added up to something far less than an "eastern alliance system" equivalent to that with Russia in 1914. For starters, none of these countries provided a military or economic counterweight to Germany as the military power of the latter revived by 1935–1936. Nor were they predisposed to operate in concert. The Poles and Czechoslovaks in particular were at daggers drawn over Silesia, to which they both laid claim. For the decade from 1925, French diplomacy sought to extend Locarno eastward to entwine Germany in a European-wide security system underwritten by London and Paris. Paris' goal became to integrate both Great Britain and Germany into a multilateral mutual assistance regime to commit London to defend France and her eastern alliances. Unfortunately for France, London initially viewed France's diplomatic flirtation with these weak and mercurial Central European states as an alibi to shun a resurrection of the *entente*. French statecraft was dealt a blow in 1934 when Warsaw signed a pact with Berlin, more or less directed against Stalin, but at the expense of the French Little Entente. German statecraft was also active in Belgrade. While some British diplomats recognized Hitler's bellicose intentions early on, London believed that the best way to contain Germany was to persuade Berlin to curtail rearmament. The Anglo-German naval agreement of 1935, which sought to limit the tonnage of a growing *Kriegsmarine*, offered an example of this approach and symbolized the crossed purposes of policy among the victors of 1918–1919 in the changing European order.[15]

Given that the aim of Europe's revisionist powers was to capsize the diplomatic order established at Versailles, Saint-Germain, and Trianon, by 1935 if not before, the incoherence of France's diplomatic encirclement plan would have left Cardinal Richelieu red-faced with embarrassment could he have caught sight of it from heaven. The urgencies for

Anglo-French diplomacy became to act in concert to deter and ultimately to destroy the German and Italian regimes. This strategy required diplomats to develop an accurate assessment of the long-term intentions of the revisionist powers, formulate a coherent strategy for coalition-building, and finally convince their political leaders to accept the risks of war with sufficient armament and at huge cost. This policy was easier said than done, as diplomats disagreed on the hostile intentions of the revisionist powers that continued to talk peace as they rearmed and embarked on campaigns of conquest. They also evinced a stubborn reluctance to jettison a decade-long policy of collective security to which many were personally and professionally committed. The 1935 Abyssinian crisis found French diplomats divided over how to appease Mussolini while supporting London's Mediterranean interests. France's ambassador to Berlin, André François-Poncet, argued through 1936 that like previous German statesmen, Hitler merely sought to have Germany acknowledged as a great power. In any case François-Poncet opined, despite an aggressive rearmament program launched in 1932, the German public's aversion to war would act as a powerful constraint on Hitler's actions. The 1938 Czechoslovak crisis again produced policy cacophony at the Quai.[16] Therefore, in part because France's diplomatic sentinels failed to agree before the September 1938 Munich meeting that Hitler and Mussolini constituted a clear and present danger, the evolution from the "collective security" of the 1920s into a more robust posture of confrontation proved a slow and erratic one. Given that the Quai d'Orsay did not speak with a common voice, no doubt out of impatience with the measured pace of diplomatic practice, and to circumvent possible obstruction from career officials, some leaders like Pierre Laval and Chamberlain preferred to deploy personal summitry in their dealings with the Italian and German leaders. The resort to individualized diplomatic initiatives enshrined in news reels and illustrated newspaper photos further diminished the influence of the Quai on the evolution of French foreign policy.[17]

Appeasement

The diplomacy and strategy of the 1930s in France are too prone to clichés that little explain the cause and effect of events nearly a century ago. The exact meaning of the term appeasement has proven elusive, especially as it was little used in the 1930s when it came to characterize the foreign policies of France and Great Britain, and because its definition evolved over time. With a view to the classic phrases of diplomacy as used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British American historian Paul Kennedy defined appeasement as: "the policy of settling international [or for that matter domestic] quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly very dangerous."[18] In the context of 1930s Europe, in which new forms of diplomacy and strategy connected to the totalitarians and the ill effects of total war, appeasement sought the avoidance of war by allowing Hitler to remedy peacefully the perceived errors and conditions of the Versailles pact in the hopes that German aspirations could be accommodated within a system of collective security with an anti-Soviet bent.[19] In the aftermath of Munich in the summer of 1938, however, appeasement increasingly became synonymous in the popular mind with surrender as the pace of German aggression only accelerated. The American historian Gaines Post argues that British practitioners of appeasement in the 1930s saw it as a theory of deterrence, which combined "conciliation with demonstrations of military force, the will to rearm, and international solidarity against aggression." What made appeasement divisive was that policymakers disagreed on where the emphasis was to be placed – constructing alliances, international sanctions, or threatening military action.[20] Even before Munich and its aftermath demonstrated that Hitler could not be placated, appeasement in France was also grasped by makers of policy as a way to buy time for rearmament.[21]

Preference in high places in Paris and London for a policy of appeasement was reinforced by several factors: the logic of France's financial and trade policies; economic frailty and fear of capital flight; rearmament problems linked to industrial renovation; and the tortuous and fitful process of French military modernization in the technical and doctrinal realms.[22] In the wake of the Popular Front government (1936–1938), there was also a fear among conservatives especially that a war requiring mass mobilization would challenge their hold on government and perhaps even pave the way for communist revolutions throughout Europe.[23] One had merely to look over the Pyrenees into Spain to see what horrors bulked at the moment in the years 1936–1939. Indeed, the period of the Popular Front coalition of socialists and Radicals, one supported by the French Communist Party (PCF), had traumatized many French officers. Despite *Deuxième Bureau* reports to the contrary, Weygand and other French generals firmly believed that the French communist party (PCF) had seized the opening of progressive government to infiltrate the army to lay the groundwork for a vast upheaval to be joined by a fifth column of left-wing Spanish, Italian, and Jewish refugees in France.[24] This helps to explain Weygand's practically hysterical pronouncements in the midst of the June 1940 retreat that PCF leader Maurice Thorez had seized power in Paris, when in fact the French communist leader was 1,500 miles away in Moscow.[25] And while Weygand plays down this incident in his memoirs, he was hardly alone – French naval chief Admiral François Darlan, Marshal Philippe Pétain, Generals Huntzinger, Héring, Voiriot, chief of the general staff for the Paris region, and his commander General Prételat, and no doubt others, also diverted troops to deal with an expected fifth column insurrection as German soldiers closed in on Paris. Not for nothing in a world of conservatives in the Third Republic did fear of communist insurrection border on paranoia among elements in the French army, one spawned by the Commune of 1871, and reinforced by 1917 in Russia, which many erroneously believed had triggered the French army mutinies of that year. The PCF had been active in protests of the 1920s against the Ruhr occupation of 1923–1924, and against colonial wars in Syria and the suppression of an uprising by the Rif of Morocco in 1925. Officers feared that the strikes that accompanied the 1936 Popular Front election were a prelude to a communist insurrection. This chronic obsession in the upper reaches of the French military with popular revolution was brought to the surface in the defeat, despite *Deuxième Bureau* assurances that the PCF-sponsored "*appareil militaire*" had failed miserably in its program to create cells and propaganda in the barracks.[26]

Scholars have traditionally linked appeasement to public opinion in the Third Republic and beyond among millions for whom war only meant catastrophe. In its primal form, appeasement was viewed as a policy manifestation that reflected a reluctance of the French and British populations to repeat the horrors of the Great War. In this way, "decadence" historians link France's 1940 defeat to a collapse of popular morale. Those scholars disinclined to accept this verdict view the evolution of popular morale as simply one factor that influenced French strategic choices in the 1930s. As public opinion gradually acknowledged the inability of a policy of appeasement to modify Hitler's aggressive behavior, political leaders were able to adopt a firmer stance against Axis aggression. In other words, resistance to German – and Italian – bellicosity increasingly in 1938–1939 became a source of popular unity, rather than a divisive policy imposed upon war-averse populations. This shift set up a post-war debate between those who like Churchill or de Gaulle had opposed appeasement as a policy failure and others like Chamberlain, Halifax, Bonnet, Flandin, Laval and so on who justified appeasement as the West's best option in the context of international and domestic political constraints in the rigors of the failure of collective security in the 1930s.[27]

From the advent of the Popular Front in 1936 to the aftermath of the Munich agreement of September 1938, appeasement enjoyed widespread popular support in France, perhaps best symbolized by the scenes of Jean Renoir's 1937 film *La Grande Illusion*, which highlighted the shared humanity of combatants and the idiocy of war. Even though he intensified French rearmament, Leon Blum's foreign policy still sought to reconcile with Germany even as it pursued Berlin's containment.[28] "One can hardly avoid the conclusion that France's grand strategy – conclusive as it was in itself – was wholly inconsistent with her alliance policy," concludes Müller.[29] Knowing that France lacked the economic and military reach to court allies in Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Europe, the Republic's long game, which de Gaulle mischaracterized as limited to "*la stricte défense du territoire*,"[30] was to keep its maritime flanks open, rely on a *repli imperial* – that is, fall back on the colonies[31] – and offer the Hexagon to Great Britain and eventually the United States as a continental bridgehead. This strategy symbolized a Julian Corbett-like vision of sea power as an enabler and sustainer of land warfare suited to a world war of indeterminate duration. Although the General was to embrace it in the aftermath of defeat as a justification for rejecting the armistice, it was not a strategy which in the mid 1930s was designed to appeal to a continentally oriented soldier like de Gaulle, suspicious of "les Anglo-Saxons," with little faith in the steadfastness of the French people, and who conceptualized the coming conflict as the latest mechanized installment in a perpetual Franco-German clash, as did Vichy and initially the resistance.[32]

Appeasement comprised several assumptions of diplomacy of dubious strength and high contingency. First, those who extended a pen to Hitler's hand reasoned that modest adjustments to Versailles would reconcile the Third Reich to life within a European collective security system that somewhat extended the international order of 1919. The risk was that, by embracing it, France and Great Britain surrendered potential strategic "opportunities" in Eastern and Central Europe that were catapulting out of the grasp of persons in London, Paris, and Geneva. The revision of policy to abet Berlin allowed Hitler to make time work for him with his march of conquest at home and abroad, to accumulate political victories. The Führer simultaneously acquired economic and financial assets, say in the Rhineland and in Austria, to boost German rearmament, and to undermine a "long war" French strategy of containment and blockade. Furthermore, Anglo-French "power, prestige and honor" evaporated as potential allies, especially Czechoslovakia, were sacrificed one by one to Hitler until appeasement assumed a "mythic status as a foreign policy of catastrophic failure."[33] French leaders associated with the policy – Blum, Daladier, Laval, Bonnet, and Gamelin, among others – subsequently justified their embrace of appeasement at Riom and elsewhere by pleading that it offered the best option given the flawed system of Third Republican governance, French military and economic weakness, and a strategic environment infarcted by international, national, and left–right ideological crossed purposes. The fallback was that, if all else failed, appeasement bought time to rearm. Unfortunately, given France's, and Europe's, fraught political environments, these calculations resulted in an uncoordinated response to Hitler's challenges in the years 1935–1939.

The fundamental miscalculation of appeasement is that almost everyone, including the Germans, totally – even willfully – misread, that is, underestimated, the radicalism and violence of Hitler and those in his corps of paladins such as Goebbels, Himmler, and Ribbentrop, believing that his ambitions could be contained in a European system that remedied the most obvious inequities of Versailles from Berlin's perspective. Until the March 1939 occupation of Czechia beyond the Sudetenland, the greatest risk of appeasement in the eyes of most European diplomats was that Hitler would seek to incorporate all Germans in Central Europe and beyond into the Reich. But Hitler's geostrategic and moral outlook was based on "race," not some tweaking of the balance of power or the realization of a nineteenth-century pan-Germanist project aborted by Otto von Bismarck's common sense from 1848 until 1879 that a Greater Germany would rupture a sound European order. According to Hitler's plan, the continental triumph of German racial imperialism as the basis of world power would mean that many nation states would cease to exist, while others would survive as German satellites according to their eugenic destiny. Perhaps, granted the generalized reign of Colonel Blimps and his French counterparts in the years 1919–1935, one could only poorly ask of Europe's inter-war leaders to radicalize their outlooks, imperial values, and diplomatic agendas effectively to counter Hitler's racist, destructive, and diabolical scheme that was less clear to many confused contemporaries, and took on a coherence later than certain persons in the twenty-first century can poorly comprehend.[34]

A dissenting opinion holds that: "French decision makers were provided with a reliable interpretation of the long-term objectives of Nazi foreign policy ..." as writes Peter Jackson. Unfortunately, the *Deuxième Bureau* rather discouraged the inclination of French leaders to act preemptively because of "a penchant for exaggerating the productive capacity of the Reich's armaments and aircraft industries; and, following from this, a tendency to overestimate German military preparedness."[35] Also, because foreign intelligence in France was controlled largely by the military, not surprisingly, it focused primarily on information of interest primarily to commanders, like the German order of battle, doctrine, weapons systems, and the like. In this aspect, every German who wore a uniform, and in the years 1936–1938, this number of men and even some women in uniform grew steadily, was then counted as a combat-ready soldier. Second, various "filters" were applied to information before it reached decision-makers. While filtering – "sterilizing" or even politicizing – information as it passed through various echelons in the hierarchal chain is a problem for all intelligence services and political systems, it was particularly acute in France with its history of civil–military distrust, especially on the left. Inter-ministerial infighting could offer different foci or interpretations of information, most notably in this period of discord between the Ministry of Defense and the Quai. No intermediate organization such as Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee existed in France to collate, evaluate, and summarize information, or to resolve differences of interpretation or perspective. In theory, this problem was eased somewhat because Édouard Daladier, in command of multiple ministerial portfolios, had access to intelligence on the state of German military preparedness since 1932 when rearmament had indeed begun with the Kurt von Schleicher cabinet.[36]

A final and classical problem became what to do with intelligence once it reached cabinet level. It must not be overlooked that from 1936 the Popular Front gave a huge impetus to French upgrades in military affairs, based in large part on reports of German rearmament. But in general, French cabinets were multi-party coalitions of convenience, inadequate forums for policy discussion, much less for policy formulation. Gamelin confessed that he and Daladier were reluctant to share intelligence with a cabinet that included people like the notoriously appeasing Foreign Minister and serial leaker Georges Bonnet.[37] Otherwise, ministers were largely free to draw their own conclusions about the gravity of the Nazi menace, based in large part on their personal proclivities, or the attitudes of their party or faction. Therefore, responsibility for French military unpreparedness in 1940 cannot be laid at the feet of French intelligence alone. Politicians and the French public were divided on how to react to German rearmament and to Hitler's aggressive foreign policy. Several considerations other than intelligence reports shaped the French response, among them alliance politics, economic limitations, and public opinion.[38] Some important French leaders also clung to hopes that appeasement would eventually satisfy Hitler's ambitions short of war.

French military planners, meanwhile, assumed a defensive hunker, which would make it impossible to combine diplomatic initiatives in Central Europe with the threat of force. That France and Great Britain emerged on opposite sides of the Abyssinian crisis, triggered by Mussolini's 3 October 1935 invasion of that country, was largely the

fault of French foreign minister Pierre Laval, "the epitome of Third Republic chicanery" charges Robert Paxton.[39] A lucrative Paris law practice and a regional media empire made Laval one of France's richest men in the inter-war years. His stance as a pragmatist willing to work with left and right, joined with a reputation as a political fixer, saw Laval assume the premiership for the first time in 1931. Unfortunately for France, Laval's domestic political skills, which French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle judged to have been "more cunning than competent," transitioned poorly into international affairs when he was named to head the Quai d'Orsay between October 1934 and February 1936. In fact, Duroselle credits Laval with being the major architect of what he condemns as the inconsistent French diplomacy of the 1930s.[40]

As French foreign minister, Laval feared that London-sponsored League sanctions on Italy imposed in the wake of Mussolini's Abyssinian incursion would shove the Italian dictator into the arms of Hitler.[41] But Laval genuinely admired Mussolini, with whom he shared Anglophobia and "*une certaine vulgarité.*" He was also encouraged by right-wing French intellectuals who, in keeping with a French conservative vision of creating a "Latin bloc" by conjoining the policies of France, Italy, and Spain, trumpeted Italy's action in Africa as a spirited expansion of Western culture and demonstration of imperial "vitality."[42] A rapprochement with Mussolini would excise the ideological component from France's differences with fascism, and allow Paris to focus on the Communist menace.[43] However, Laval's attempts to appease Mussolini only succeeded in alienating London, and did nothing to impede the Italian dictator's slither toward Hitler.[44] British deputy foreign minister Anthony Eden, already concerned that growing social and political unrest in France that peaked in the February 1934 riots outside of parliament might make Paris an unreliable partner, saw Laval's initiative as a direct threat to London's critical Mediterranean–Red Sea link to its East of Suez empire. As a consequence, Eden threatened to withdraw London's military commitments to France under the 1925 Locarno agreement. Rather than choose between London and Rome, Laval's temporization and absence of clear objectives had sabotaged League-based collective security, and launched France's slide toward appeasement and international isolation.[45]

As an encore, Laval negotiated a mutual security agreement with Stalin. But as Sean McMeekin notes, it contained "no binding military clauses whatsoever. It was all provocation and no deterrence," and actually served Hitler as an excuse to remilitarize the Rhineland in March 1936. In this reading, France's failure to seal a Soviet alliance was no "missed opportunity," because Stalin had no interest in "collective security," but sought to overturn Versailles, weaken capitalist regimes, and expand communism globally.[46] So, while in the long run, Allied strategy against the Axis that combined long war with peripheral operations and economic blockade was successful, in the short run it was condemned to failure because Stalin's participation was arguably *the* key element that would have allowed such a strategy to succeed.[47]

In the short run, however, Laval's initiatives locked France into diplomatic purdah as warnings of remilitarization of the Rhineland began to circulate in the summer of 1935. The timing of Hitler's announcement to coincide with a bitter and divisive French election and concerns over a sliding franc helped to guarantee a muted response from Paris. In the event, the *Deuxième Bureau* reported that the French military was superior to that of Germany at the time, although it appears that French commander-in-chief Maurice Gamelin (Figure 1.1) failed to share those evaluations with his political superiors.[48] Rather, the army staff conflated SA (*Sturmabteilung*, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party), police, and labor corps units to report a figure of 295,000 German troops organized in twenty-one to twenty-two infantry divisions.[49] Memories of a calamitous 1923 Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr remained fresh, so that both the Quai and the Finance Ministry, which feared that a crisis in the Rhineland would trigger a run on the franc, urged restraint.[50] Eager not to let the crisis go to waste, however, Gamelin tried to use the Rhineland as an opportunity to create an "Anglo-Franco-Belgian bloc whose massive solidity would be compensation for the loss of the Rhenish 'no man's land.'" In the event, he desperately miscalculated the international response according to his biographer.[51] Gamelin's effort to reconstruct an Anglo-French security cooperation, that Laval had significantly impaired, spoke volumes about political and administrative confusion in the Third Republic, the flaccid nature of civilian control of the military in France, and Gamelin's naive, if not ignorant, grasp of European affairs. Communications between London and Paris were at best perfunctory during the crisis. Belgian King Leopold worried that war would fracture his country, already deeply divided along political and linguistic lines. He therefore retreated into a Swiss-style neutrality minus the Alps. The only international support that France gained for intervention came from Poland, the very last country whose support Gamelin sought to court.[52] The service chiefs became fixated on French weakness and the definitive alienation of Great Britain, whose hoped-for rearmament became the object of their daily devotions.[53]

Figure 1.1 French army commander-in-chief Maurice Gamelin.

Eugen Weber notes that the French Commander-in-Chief, "brilliant but incapable of initiative" even when he commanded superior forces,[54] had made no plans to counter the Rhineland reoccupation because he was convinced that the government would accept it as a *fait accompli* in any case. But to solidify French inertia, Gamelin told the caretaker government of Albert Sarraut that a military response would require "all or nothing" total mobilization, precisely because he did not wish to act, and so supplied yet another alibi for inaction to his civilian bosses. Gamelin sought to postpone skirmishes that might derail his long-term rearmament plan. But in his defense, neither political nor popular support existed in France for a military response.[55] Nor did Blum seek to stir up the pacifist wing of the Socialists (SFIO) led by his party rival Paul Faure, and so cautioned against unilateral action, which telegraphed a message of foreign policy faintheartedness for the soon-to-organize Popular Front.[56] For the French public, the construction of the Maginot Line, which became a viable defensive barrier on the Franco-German frontier by 1936,[57] induced a false sense of security. The perspective of London and Paris putting their differences aside for a concerted opposition to the Rhineland remilitarization, which came on the heels of Germany's 1935 reintroduction of conscription in flagrant violation of Versailles, might have caused the German dictator to behave more cautiously, at least in the short term.

But this is mere speculation. More likely, as Gamelin feared, an invasion of German territory would turn into a rerun of the costly *Ruhrkampf* of 1923 that had found the French battling German popular resistance organized in a "national unity front" that resulted in 122 German deaths. An upstart Adolph Hitler had manipulated the Ruhr occupation to condemn Weimar as acquiescent to Allied demands. In the view of Ernest May, any Anglo-French attempt to counter the 1936 German reoccupation of the Rhineland would have rebounded to Hitler's advantage, rather than provoking his overthrow.[58] A French invasion would unify Germany, allow Hitler to play the victim both at home and abroad, further isolate France, and threaten to undermine France's already fragile finances.[59] On the debit side of the ledger, however, the remilitarization of the Rhineland was a blow, because it took away France's military buffer, tanked French prestige in Central Europe, and delivered the *coup de grâce* to Locarno and collective security.[60] The subsequent construction of the Siegfried Line made it more difficult to aid France's allies in the east. Brussels reclaimed its "independence" by renouncing its military alliance with Paris, which would further complicate French war planning. Paris' choice in the wake of the Rhineland remilitarization was to accept German hegemony in Central Europe or finalize a military pact with the USSR.[61] France did neither. By failing to take the initiative in the Rhineland, France had telegraphed the message that it was no longer a great power, which accelerated the perception of French "decadence."[62]

Of course, the revisionist argument is that French inaction over the Rhineland simply confirmed what was already obvious.[63] Nevertheless, Leon Blum inherited this diplomatic "landscape of ruins"[64] when his Popular Front government took power in May 1936. Historians have painted a largely sympathetic picture of Blum, who is most remembered in the popular mind at least for the introduction of the forty-hour work week and two weeks' paid holiday which the French have subsequently embraced and expanded as a sort of civic entitlement. But for those of his era, Blum became at best an incomplete, even a timid, reformer. Simultaneously, he was reviled unfairly in the French military and on the right as "the man of Stalin."[65] A Jaurès protégé of great intelligence, charm, and sophistication, even elegance, Blum stood out from a cast of Third Republic politicians who "were scarcely pleasant company," in the view of conservative journalist Henri Géraud, who wrote under the pseudonym Pertinax, and whose job it was to cultivate them. "Surely no one would ever have thought of entertaining them had not their government position made them temporarily interesting." In this crowded political field where intelligence rarely combined with character, nor decency with decisiveness, Blum stood out as "a man whose conversation was broad and subtle, a man of transparent honesty and charming manners. As a human being, he attracted one's respect and friendship."[66] Unfortunately, the very qualities which made Blum such a refined and agreeable dinner companion worked to undermine his effectiveness as a political leader. Blum's quaint views on the primacy of morality in politics, the value of conciliation and compromise, and his desire to achieve justice through social reform made him in the view of one of his biographers, Jean Lacouture, "an anachronistic figure ... not perhaps a man for the time of assassins."[67] A Jew of Alsatian origin whose parliamentary career only initiated at the late age of forty-seven, Blum was an outsider who underestimated the corrosive forces of his era. He always saw himself as a placeholder, a politician *malgré lui*, an amateur who preferred writing poetry to mapping plans to thwart Hitler, confront Europe's – and France's – often venomous antisemitism, or deal with the ruthless scheming and unceasing policy shifts of the PCF. Gamelin, who fancied himself "the personification of the educated soldier" with interests in art, history, and Bergsonian philosophy, privately disdained Blum as "a bogus or sham intellectual."[68] Blum's formidable intellect, more inclined to analysis than action, became a handicap, while his preference for temporization and compromise often translated into indecision. Vacillation was in part forced on him by the fact that his socialists – the SFIO – were bitterly split between anti-fascists and pacifists.[69] Party divisions restricted Blum's foreign policy agenda to "pious aspirations" based on collective security and disarmament which the Abyssinian crisis followed by the Rhineland reoccupation had rendered obsolete, but which many on the left continued to embrace through the Munich crisis of September 1938.[70]

In many respects, Leon Blum was unlucky. For no sooner had the Rhineland crisis receded and the wildcat strikes that had greeted the advent of his Popular Front government begun to dissipate than civil war broke out in Spain in July 1936. The Spanish Civil War became the central foreign policy conundrum of Blum's premiership, which arguably he mishandled by taking counsel of his fears and seeking consensus rather than providing leadership.[71] Faced with a divided cabinet and Senate opposition which reflected a lack of popular support for intervention except among communists and a knot of anti-fascist socialists eager to satisfy Madrid's plea for arms, Blum settled on a policy of non-intervention worked out by his Foreign

Minister, Yvon Delbos, which he preferred to call "non-interference."[72] But apparently struck with a "guilty conscience," he turned a blind eye to a secret program to funnel arms to the Republicans worked out by several of his associates. This typical Blum temporization benefited no one: too few French arms trickled into the Iberian Peninsula to tip the military balance against the torrent of Italian and German aid. But when news of the arms shipments leaked, the French right, which denounced the Spanish Republic as a communist front, erupted with righteous outrage. The news also irritated some of his Radical Party allies led by Édouard Daladier, who complained of his "relaxed non-intervention."[73] Meanwhile, those on the left of his coalition, including the communists and most Radicals and Radical-Socialists who supported the Spanish Republicans, not to mention the British Labour Party, saw Blum's backtracking as a spineless betrayal of Madrid.[74] Nevertheless, Blum remained convinced that non-intervention had prevented the outbreak of a general European war in 1936–1937. But more importantly, in his view non-intervention avoided a possible military *coup* or even a civil war in France, and kept the Popular Front from fragmenting. Duroselle cites Blum's muddled Iberian policy as more evidence of the immobility and paralysis of French diplomacy.[75] Writing in a period when "decadence" held the historical high ground, another of Blum's biographers, Joel Colton, also considered Blum's failure to aid the Spanish Republic "the most serious miscalculation of his government out of the misconceived notion that totalitarian dictatorships would honor agreements they had signed and that peace and the Spanish Republic could both be saved."[76] The Spanish episode made Blum appear simultaneously indecisive, naive, and stubborn by clinging to a failed policy. Abroad he was perceived as insincere – even duplicitous – which reinforced France's reputation as an unreliable diplomatic partner.[77]

Blum's foreign policy goal was to strike a triple alliance between France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. One view is that Blum's greatest foreign policy failure, one that overshadowed his limp response to the Spanish Civil War and in part shaped it, was not to have solidified a military pact with Moscow. But this was to prove a bridge too far – of the Popular Front's supporters, only the PCF, whose goal was to make French foreign policy Moscow-friendly, was keen to bolster ties with the USSR. The Socialists and Radicals remained suspicious.[78] Furthermore, prospects of a Franco-Soviet military pact reinforced the view on the right that the February 1936 electoral triumph of the Spanish Republicans, followed by the victory in May of the French Popular Front, signaled Moscow's creeping influence in Western Europe. Meanwhile, on the left, many European intellectuals muted their criticism of communism, interpreting events in Spain and France as evidence that Stalin supported the spread of democracy. This produced a backlash among "the enemies of the Popular Front [who] presented it as a conspiracy of the Communist International to rule the world," writes Timothy Snyder. "European public opinion was so polarized by 1936 that it was indeed difficult to criticize the Soviet regime without seeming to endorse fascism and Hitler. This, of course, was the shared binary logic of National Socialism and the Popular Front: Hitler called his enemies 'Marxists,' while Stalin's opponents were 'fascists.' They agreed that there was no middle ground."[79]

The Gaullist Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac blasted the French right for sabotaging a potential Franco-Soviet alliance by linking it to the threat of "the internal enemy."[80] But they were not alone. In this fractious political environment, Blum would have had to overcome considerable opposition in the Quai d'Orsay, the French military, and his Popular Front Radical Party partners, not to mention in London, to have inched closer to Moscow. Critics complained that Moscow might invoke the March 1936 Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance to draw the French and other Locarno signatories into a war for Soviet interests. Largely due to French prevarication, preliminary Franco-Soviet staff talks initiated by Blum in 1936 had collapsed by May 1937.[81] Stalin's show trials of alleged traitors in the service of foreign intelligence agencies, begun in August 1936, spread to the Soviet military from late June 1937, where they eventually claimed eight senior military commanders, about half of the Red Army generals, and countless others. In the shadow of Stalin's purges, Gamelin complained that while he had always favored a Franco-Soviet alliance, the case for the USSR as a reliable military ally became more difficult to make in the Quai and the Defense Ministry, whose diplomats and soldiers were inclined toward distrust of their Soviet counterparts in any case.[82] The only reliable army east of Germany, in Gamelin's opinion, was that of Poland.[83] But this appears to offer yet another Gamelin alibi for inaction.

From a strategic perspective, Hitler was not going to launch an attack on France before he had neutralized Stalin with the August 1939 Nazi–Soviet Pact.[84] So while some French and British leaders, including Daladier, Bonnet, and Halifax, recognized that it was necessary to prevent a Nazi–Soviet covenant, they took no positive steps to preempt it with an Allied–Soviet arrangement. This was in part because Chamberlain and others insisted that a debilitated Soviet military could offer no effective military assistance. But whatever the weaknesses of the Red Army as revealed in Finland in November 1939 and in the early stages of Barbarossa from June 1941, its potential was superior to the diminutive, poorly armed, undertrained, and indifferently led force that Great Britain reluctantly mustered for France in 1939–1940. Furthermore, conventional wisdom held that a deal between bitter ideological and political adversaries like Hitler and Stalin could never happen,[85] a fatal strategic miscalculation as it turned out. So, while the Franco-Soviet pact came to be regarded in Paris as a hollow agreement, Hitler nevertheless invoked it as an excuse to remilitarize the Rhineland in March 1936, and to lay the foundation for the November 1936 Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan, as part of Berlin's strategy to distract Moscow from European commitments.[86]

These setbacks left Paris to juggle its interests between those of London and the toxic antagonisms of the Central European states. If the Balkans were Europe's Orient, Central Europe was its purlieu, a site of ancestral hatreds, disputed boundaries, and opportunistic conventions. As has been noted, France had bilateral treaties with the so-called *Petite Entente* – Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia – a full military accord with Poland, and a pact with the USSR. Yet, Paris' ability to operationalize these agreements was complicated by the situation on the ground. Romania and Hungary were in a spat over Transylvania. Paris considered Warsaw's prime minister, Józef Beck, unreliable after he signed a ten-year non-aggression pact with Germany. Poland was also at odds with Czechoslovakia, which had concluded a mutual assistance agreement with Moscow. Poland was unwilling to allow Soviet troops onto its territory. While Romania might permit Soviet overflights, Paris was unclear how Soviet forces could be deployed to help Czechoslovakia.[87] Romania and Yugoslavia refused to back France over Czechoslovakia so as not to alienate Germany and Italy. Yugoslavia had signed a non-aggression pact with Italy in March 1937, which effectively ended the Petite Entente. As Julian Jackson notes, this complexity robbed the Popular Front of a workable foreign policy.[88]

Paris' problem was that reliance on Central European states to contain Germany was a non-starter. From the unification of Germany in 1871, and certainly from 1918, it was clear that Central Europe would be dominated by Germany or Russia, not France, with or without de Gaulle's proposed 100,000-man armored force. Furthermore, Paris lacked the military, diplomatic, and economic clout to align interests among disputatious governments who legitimized themselves by picking quarrels with their neighbors. David Kaiser has demonstrated that no basis existed for a quid pro quo between France and potential allies in Central and Southeastern Europe. In the first place, these countries needed weapons for defense, which Paris simply could not supply because from 1936 it was preoccupied with defense industry nationalization and reorganization to rearm its own forces. There was also a fear that arms shipped to the east would be lost should Germany overrun Central Europe.[89]

Second, potential European allies had no way to secure loans for weapons except through agricultural products, mainly timber and cereals, or in Romania's case refined oil, that France could not accept because it was bound by imperial preference. For this reason, the Agriculture Ministry repeatedly blocked trade concessions to Danubian states because they would have contravened preferences for agricultural products from the Maghreb and Indochina especially, or competed with domestic production. The Quai, and the ministries of agriculture and finance, had different priorities, which "the medley of politicians pulling against one other" in a carousel of cabinets was powerless to resolve.[90] Third, Central and Southeastern Europe was dominated by German trade interests which the French were too weak and too distant to displace. Berlin bound up Eastern Europe with trade deals that gave arms for agricultural products that guaranteed Hitler a steady supply of raw materials and made these countries economically dependent on Germany.[91] As a consequence, France's failure to react to Hitler's March 1936 reoccupation of the Rhineland, combined with its inability to supply much-needed arms, convinced policymakers in Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia that France was not a dependable partner. Fourth, London, whose cooperation Paris prioritized, opposed France's entangling commitments in Central Europe. French acquiescence to Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland was done with an eye to gaining British support. But, for the countries of Central Europe, it showed just where Paris' priorities lay.[92] For all of these reasons, some important French policymakers believed that Central Europe invariably would slip into Germany's grasp without war.[93] So, with a dearth of viable strategic partners in the short run, and faced with the growing momentum of German rearmament, France had no choice but to rearm.

Rearmament

One of the strongest rebuttals to a "decadence" school of post-war historians, whose dean was Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, has been to highlight the significant effort at rearmament carried out by the Popular Front, even at the price of sacrificing the left's social agenda as well as some of its pacifist principles. The social costs of rearmament were also high. The surge in production quotas required an increase in workplace discipline, which meant rolling back some of the signature Popular Front achievements like the forty-hour week, paid holidays, pay rises, and the right to strike. Having at first tried to sabotage rearmament by capital flight, according to French historian Robert Frankenstein, the business class then turned it to their advantage by invoking the production crisis to reverse worker gains surrendered in 1936–1937.[94] The demands of rearmament returned the upper hand in the workplace back to the bosses and foremen, who were eager to avenge the indignities suffered and reverse the concessions made during the explosion of strikes and factory occupations that had occurred in the wake of the May 1936 Popular Front electoral victory. As the pace of rearmament quickened, foremen could require workers to labor up to seventy-two hours a week, suppress days off, impose night work even though workers had no way to return home once their after-hours shifts ended, and enforce strict discipline on the assembly lines.[95] Furthermore, devaluation and inflation eroded workers' pay raises awarded in 1936.

In many respects, Blum was simply expanding a rearmament program begun even before the remilitarization of the Rhineland triggered a widespread acknowledgement that France must take significant steps to increase the security of the Hexagon. Georges Leygues, navy minister for most of the years between 1925 and 1933, had launched an ambitious naval rearmament program which by 1939 found France in possession of what came to be called "*la belle flotte de Darlan*," although wartime French naval chief and sometime Vichy chief minister Admiral François Darlan became the fleet's heir rather than its progenitor. The French navy was superior to either the German or the Italian fleet. Conceptually, it offered an infinitely more rounded and capable armada than had the disparate flotilla that had constituted France's navy in 1914.[96] Money had been voted for what became known as the Maginot Line in January 1930, and construction continued until 1939, although it remained a work in progress. As army chief of staff in the early 1930s, Weygand's modernization plans that included motorization for part of the infantry and cavalry, as well as money for training and maintenance, had been curtailed in the 20 percent slash in government expenditures ordered upon the simultaneous 1932 arrival of the Depression and the *Cartel des Gauches*, a governing coalition devoted both to disarmament and to a balanced budget.[97] In April 1934, Foreign Minister Louis Barthou initiated a muscle up in the wake of the collapse of collective security.[98] At the end of 1934, Germany reintroduced conscription, and on 1 March 1935 announced the birth of the *Luftwaffe*. In the four years between 1934 and 1938, French military expenditures doubled.[99] Rearmament was sequenced by service: in 1935, the French air force attracted the bulk of the modernization funds. The following year, Blum refocused rearmament back to the army in the wake of the Rhineland remilitarization. From 1938, the air force again became the beneficiary of France's military upgrade.[100] As has been seen, the navy got the jump on rearmament from the 1920s. But it was largely excluded from this late-1930s sprint to war

readiness, which in the view of Robert Frankenstein may help to explain the subsequent "admiralization" of Vichy.[101] François Cochet argues that the French did not lack funds for rearmament. Even with the budget cuts in the wake of the Depression, "special funds" were often voted to make up for shortfalls. In constant francs, the French spent more on defense in 1938 than they had in 1913 in the midst of the so-called "Nationalist Revival."[102] But at this point, France's rearmament surge ran aground on a sequence of reefs – financial, industrial, organizational, doctrinal – familiar shoals well marked on the charts of French military modernization.

Blum opted to finance rearmament through loans, because he feared that new taxes on consumption might erode popular support for a military buildup. Borrowing carried two risks, however: first, the Popular Front would have to go hat-in-hand to the people with capital, which meant the Bank of France. Second, the holders of capital in France knew that rearmament meant devaluation. The threat of devaluation would lead to capital flight, while lowering the value of the franc would trigger inflation.[103] Jonathan Kirshner is not the first scholar to argue that, while monetary orthodoxy did not cause the defeat of France, the stranglehold of orthodox financial policies suffocated the French economy and made French military modernization more difficult to achieve. The financial community was capped by the Bank of France, known as the Bastille of French financial policy, for which there would be no 14 July 1789. The Bank's governors and regents favored the interests of their shareholders and supported monetary orthodoxy at the expense of all other national priorities, including security. Because the Bank fixed the discount rate, it could severely limit the government's ability to borrow. The Bank's insistence on the conversion of the franc into gold at the 1928 level "not only prolonged the Depression but also sapped the strength and assertiveness of French foreign policy," Kirshner argues.[104] French industrial production lagged significantly behind that of Great Britain and Germany, while the requirement for a balanced budget delayed and complicated the modernization of France's military arsenal.

While the Popular Front abandoned the balanced budget to launch rearmament, their cabinets remained "prisoners of the capital holders."[105] As with many Popular Front initiatives, Blum's reform of the Bank of France was timid, ineffective, and only served to annoy financiers who continued to export their cash, whether out of prudence or from a deliberate desire to sabotage Popular Front initiatives is open to speculation.[106] Rather than nationalize and reorganize the Bank of France into a central credit agency for the government and for French businesses in need of funds to restructure and modernize, Blum merely tinkered with its governance structure.[107] Financial orthodoxy hurt French security in three ways: first, it sapped the strength of the economy as a whole because interest rates ranging between 9 and 12 percent discouraged investment. Poor economic performance eroded France's industrial base and delayed rearmament. Second, deflationary policies contracted government revenue, pressured budgets, slowed the modernization of defense industries, and led to cuts in defense spending. Finally, fears for the fragility of the franc conditioned the assessment of foreign policy choices and inhibited French leaders from rising to the challenge in crises.[108]

Kirshner insists that fear for the stability of the franc contributed to France's failure to act in the Rhineland and to Paris' futile effort to resuscitate the corpse of collective security in the face of Hitler's provocations. The ideas of John Maynard Keynes and Franklin Roosevelt's resort to deficit spending to finance the New Deal were viewed in France's conservative Finance Ministry as "Anglo-Saxon" monetary heresy that ran counter in both culture and economic theory to France's attachment to the gold standard. Budget-busting rearmament programs from 1936 created runs on the franc, led to repeated devaluations, and eventually toppled the Blum government in June 1937.[109] Weapons ordered as part of Blum's rearmament were delayed after Blum fell in June 1937, and his successor Camille Chautemps and Finance Minister Georges Bonnet again cut defense spending to balance the budget, which pushed back some new weapons and aircraft into 1939.[110]

Nor did France's leaders appear to understand the consequences of dumping buckets of cash into a dysfunctional arms procurement system anchored in France's antiquated industrial structure. French industry had suffered from a lack of capital to restructure and modernize, so that machine tools were twenty years old on average, compared with seven in Germany. Paris briefly considered creating an armaments ministry in 1938, but postponed the idea until September 1939 when it was set up under Raoul Dautry, "a first-rate engineer, thoroughly accustomed to large-scale planning and operations, a man of exemplary patriotism," according to Pertinax.[111] And while some historians hail Dautry's call-up as a sign of the dynamism of the Third Republic's ramp up for war,[112] in fact, Dautry's nomination offered an eleventh-hour Hail Mary in the face of the utter failure of French industry to meet its production quotas under Daladier's laissez-faire approach to war planning.[113] In the event, Dautry would face a "task … of Herculean proportions."[114] In fact, the delays, absence of planning, a shortage of investment capital, and the transition from peace to a wartime footing meant that France's armaments surge was late, and lacked a clear structure and set of priorities. By 1938, French industry was working at full throttle to increase military weapons by 50 percent and munitions by 100 percent. Premier and Defense Minister in 1938 Édouard Daladier focused on production quotas but neglected the macroeconomic infrastructure to support them. Non-ferrous metals, coal, petrol, shipping, SNCF rolling stock which had suffered from lack of investment, and so on were all lacking. Despite the obvious production bottlenecks and shortfalls, only in the spring of 1940 after the high command had presented the government with a revised program of armaments requirements that called for a tripling of industrial capacities did France dispatch a special mission to the United States to tap into US industrial potential, a long overdue step.[115]

Rearmament and the Air Force

If the challenges of upgrading the French army were serious, those in the French aircraft industry bordered on catastrophic. The 1930s dawned on a French air force whose Great War glories had receded into the mists of wistful memory. An air ministry was created only in November 1928 over the vehement objections of the army and navy, while in that year air force personnel abandoned army khaki for a dark blue uniform uncomfortably similar in tone to that of the navy. Although air bases replaced the old aviation regiments, only in 1932 did the army agree to cede control over their air units on condition that they would be reorganized into tactical support groups. For its part, the navy categorically refused to release its planes. A July 1934 law made the air force an independent arm. However, emancipation from the army was conditional, for in wartime, the air force would provide defensive cover for mobilization and then shift to "cooperation" with the ground forces under the theater commander, invariably an army general. This "bastard" compromise, based on an outdated 1914 idea of "mobilization," stymied the development of a strategic air concept in France. Furthermore, the newly independent air force had to evolve an air doctrine, define a structure, construct a balanced inventory of aircraft, and then brawl with sister services over budget.[116]

The new French air force produced Plan I, which called for the production of 1,360 front-line aircraft in three years, along with air bases, arms, munitions, radios, and spare parts. But here the problems began, because France had no modern prototypes to build, only outdated 1920s designs. Worse, unlike Germany, which created an industrial infrastructure before it begun building planes, France simply dumped orders on a French aeronautical industry which offered an ill-organized hotchpotch of antiquated companies, backed by a tangle of subsidiaries, sub-contractors, and small

Figure 1.2 Air Minister Pierre Cot with his chief of staff and future resistance hero Jean Moulin. While Cot is credited for having nationalized and rationalized the French aircraft industry, in the process creating Air France, his attempts to reform the French air force met resistance. He and Moulin were outed for smuggling arms to the Spanish Republic in 1936 and forced to resign.

artisans clustered around Paris. As a result, the 1935 bump in the air force budget resulted in the delivery of only 500 aircraft.[117]

In June 1936, Blum named Radical politician Pierre Cot (Figure 1.2) to head the Air Ministry. On the surface, Cot seemed an inspired choice. A stout advocate of air power, Cot believed that a proliferation of aero clubs and what was called *aviation populaire* would create a grass roots constituency for French air force expansion. He had also engineered a shotgun consolidation of several independent airlines threatened by a withdrawal of their state subsidies into Air France. Cot arrived at the Air Ministry in the Boulevard Victor with a reputation as an advocate for Italian air theorist Giulio Douhet's vision of a strategic bomber force acting independently of other services. But French air doctrine remained in limbo because the French air force had yet to form an air staff or an Air War College, which welcomed its first class only in 1937.[118] In fact, after serious clashes in 1937 with army commander-in-chief Gamelin, who threatened to create his own army air corps, Cot conceded the requirement for air support of land forces, and so weighted his air program toward medium bombers.[119]

Cot's major challenge was to oversee the nationalization of 80 percent of France's aeronautical industry voted by parliament in August 1936. These air factories were also to be decentralized and relocated beyond German bomber range in Brittany and the Southwest. At the same time, parliament authorized the creation of a great air fleet to be built by 1941, that would include ground support units, an independent bomber force, anti-aircraft units, and paratroops. Blum and Cot bet that nationalization would allow the industry to concentrate on the production of a limited range of models and coordinate the production of guns, landing gear, propellers, motors, and other accouterments with that of air frames, something that was not invariably the case. A combination of this relocation process and a shortage of funds meant that in 1937, French aircraft production virtually zeroed out at a time when the *Luftwaffe* was expanding at a rate of 300 new planes a month. Not surprisingly, the stagnation of French aircraft production and an absence of modern prototypes seriously impacted the morale of the air force.

Nor did Cot's notoriously progressive opinions reconcile the air staff to their civilian boss. Cot was a strong advocate of a Franco-Soviet alliance, in part because he had been favorably impressed by the quality of the Red Air Force during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1933, especially with its airborne forces. He even went so far as to propose that France combine its air force with those of the USSR, Britain, and Czechoslovakia into a vast air fleet to overwhelm those of Germany and Italy, a proposal that allowed his enemies to denounce him as naive, unpatriotic, even defeatist.[120] Cot's pro-Soviet sympathies appeared confirmed when the cover was blown on the Popular Front's clandestine scheme to smuggle arms to the Spanish Republic, spearheaded by Cot and his chief of staff and future resistance hero Jean Moulin. This collapsed what remained of Cot's credibility in the air force, which had attracted a large number of right-wing officers, and with many leaders of the aeronautical industry. His critics claimed that in his preoccupation with reorganizing the air industry, Cot had neglected recruitment and training. Howls of protest ensued when Cot forcibly retired 400 air force officers who had exceeded the retirement age, a regulation habitually ignored in the services according to Pertinax. Indeed, the right-wing journalist speculated that anyone visiting 4bis Boulevard des Invalides, the army's peacetime headquarters, might easily have concluded that General Methuselah was in command.[121] Faithful to the spirit of *plus ça change*, identical complaints had been voiced in 1914. However, when Cot subsequently elevated 400 NCOs to officer rank, he was accused of fomenting a Masonic hijack of the air force. Indeed, to be labeled an "*officier Pierre Cot* " invariably translated into forced retirement in the summer of 1940.[122] This friction in the air ministry caused Cot to cocoon himself with a small staff of trusted advisors. The fact that he seldom convened the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Air* basically marginalized the air staff from consultations on air doctrine, air force organization, or input on new models.[123] So toxic was Cot's reputation that de Gaulle, desperate for any warm body to staff his nascent Free French movement, refused to enlist the former air minister when he appeared in London in 1940.[124]

Nationalization of the French aeronautical industry had simply extended the production of obsolete models, so that by 1937 the French air force was in crisis. "You have no modern aircraft and you are not capable of producing one," Chamberlain complained to French Premier Camille Chautemps and his Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos during their visit to London in the autumn of 1937. On his return to Paris, Chautemps' enquiries made him realize that the British Prime Minister was far better informed about the state of the French air force than was he.[125] When Daladier was told in 1938 that France's 35,000 aeronautical workers produced only 40 planes a month while 80,000 German workers turned out 400 planes every thirty days, he declared the situation "humiliating." At a secret meeting of War, Air, and Navy committees of the Chamber and Senate, Daladier conceded that France was falling behind Germany in numbers and quality of aircraft.

When Radical-Socialist deputy Guy La Chambre was enlisted by Chautemps to head the Air Ministry in January 1938, he immediately realized that he had inherited an air rearmament program that was seriously over budget while simultaneously under-performing. Pertinax characterized La Chambre as a Daladier flunky ignorant of air issues who allowed himself to be bullied by Ministry bureaucrats in the habit of cutting their own contracts with private suppliers with a minimum of oversight.[126] Nor was La Chambre popular among his fellow parliamentarians, who accused him of inflating air production figures for political purposes. In the wake of the French air force's abysmal performance in 1940, La Chambre's optimistic assessment of French air force combat power delivered in the critical meeting of the *Comité permanent de la Défense nationale* (CPDN) of 23 August 1939, that took the decision to declare war should the Germans invade Poland, was considered criminal dereliction of duty. Historians treat La Chambre more sympathetically, however. The new Air Minister's close links with Daladier, combined with an acknowledgment in parliament that the French air force was in dire straits, helped La Chambre to push forward a crash program of air modernization.

La Chambre chose Air Force General Joseph Vuillemin to head his new force. A rugged, even taciturn, veteran of the First World War and of bladder-busting endurance flights across Africa in the inter-war years, Vuillemin was no *homme à dossiers*, but a pilot's pilot. Sir Edward Spears, who in the company of Churchill encountered Vuillemin on 1 June 1940, at Villacoublay airfield southeast of Paris, described him with schoolboy-like malice: "He looked what he in fact was, a pilot of the last war who had gone to seed. N.C.O. was written all over him. Rather fat, rather pasty, bursting out of a uniform several sizes too small, which is a common failing of both French airmen and sailors, his bovine blue eyes had the same expression of rather hostile bewilderment to be observed in oxen as they watch the trains go by." Former Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos confirmed to Spears that Vuillemin "is quite inadequate. *Pas à la hauteur.*"[127] Pertinax believed that Vuillemin was able to function as air chief only because Gamelin supplied him with a competent chief of staff.[128] But in 1938, Vuillemin was able to convey to his new civilian boss the poor state and abysmal morale of the service he had been selected to oversee.[129]

La Chambre realized that aircraft were being ordered with minimal input from the air force command to insure that they corresponded to a general concept of air defense. One of La Chambre's first acts was to reorganize the *Conseil supérieure de l'Air* with the mission to define an air policy and the prerogatives of the air chief Vuillemin.[130] La Chambre also realized that, despite alarming intelligence reports about the dramatic evolution of the German and Italian air forces, and technological progress which had practically doubled the speed of fighters, the French air force continued to fill its inventory with obsolete planes that were technologically three years behind German and Italian models. Furthermore, the man-hours required to build a plane had jumped from 2,000 to 15,000–20,000 a month, even 40,000 for larger bombers.

Vuillemin riveted the attention of those present at a 15 March 1938 meeting of the CPDN, when he predicted that, should war break out, the French air force would be obliterated within two weeks. La Chambre scrapped the previous failing rearmament plans in favor of Plan V, which envisioned a three-phase overhaul that would prioritize fighters to give the air force 2,617 front-line planes and 2,122 reserve aircraft by March 1941, earlier if possible, with fighters as a priority. The air force would expand from 55,000 to 83,000 personnel, while new factories would be built for an aeronautical industry that would expand from 50,000 to 80,000 workers by the end of 1938. The Air Force was given 30 percent of the defense budget to realize these goals. This did not sit well with Gamelin, nor with Darlan, who had his own naval rearmament priorities.

La Chambre, aided by his chief engineer Joseph Roos, sought to breathe energy into the French aeronautical industry. Unfortunately, Plan V encountered many of the same problems as had its predecessors: outmoded plant that could not be refitted before January 1939; an absence of skilled workers to augment the workforce on short notice; a lagging French metallurgical industry; delays caused by disputes over prototypes; each new model required many months of adaptation and numerous modifications; and so on. He tried to borrow methods from a successful British model of RAF modernization. In April 1938, La Chambre commissioned a French senator to initiate negotiations to purchase up to 1,000 US fighters and spare parts. By the armistice, 980 US-manufactured planes were in French service, some of which were enlisted in the battle for France, where they proved generally superior in performance to French planes.[131]

Like its failed predecessors, Plan V initially proved disappointing – on 1 April 1939, only 433 of the first tranche of 1,878 planes had been received. The good news was that aircraft production had increased from 40 planes a month in 1938 to 300 by the outbreak of war in 1939. By hiring females, the aircraft industry numbered 180,000 employees by December 1939, each working on average fifty-four hours a week. But the air force was not scheduled to receive its full inventory of planes until March 1941, and in the interim, those bought in the United States could not fill the gap. France's crash rearmament program was cut short of its goals by the invasion.[132]

Counting available aircraft is a perilous enterprise. Nevertheless, when war broke out in September 1939, the French air force listed an inventory of 2,227 planes, up from 533 in 1938. This was a significant production achievement given France's relatively small and antiquated industrial base. By 10 May 1940, the French air force counted 4,807 combat aircraft, of which 1,972 were stationed in France. Of these, 686, or 28.7 percent, were "unavailable," a normal maintenance rate according to historian of the French air force Patrick Facon, in part because France lacked aircraft repair centers, while the transition of an aircraft from factory to front line proved a glacial process. La Chambre was later criticized because French bombers – the Bloch MB.200 and 210, the Potez 540, and the Amiot 143, a true antique – were considered so slow and poorly armored that they could only sortie safely at night. Many commanders hesitated to order France's lumbering bomber force to undertake what were in effect suicide missions. Nevertheless, in May 1940 French bombers were forced into a sacrificial and largely futile daylight attempt to pinpoint bridges the *Wehrmacht* had thrown across the Meuse around Sedan. Also, reports from the Spanish Civil War demonstrated the value of dive and low-level bombing in support of land operations, although France's defensive doctrine discouraged the integration of these techniques into French air tactics.[133]

When obsolete aircraft are subtracted, Facon arrives at a figure of 1,013 French front-line aircraft. In addition, 416 British aircraft were dispatched to France in September 1939 out of the RAF's inventory of 1,873 planes. This Allied air fleet was aligned against 5,104 front-line *Luftwaffe* planes, of which around 3,500 participated in the Battle for France, handing the Germans a 2.5-to-1 aircraft advantage by Facon's calculations. Karl-Heinz Frieser counters that numerical and technical superiority of the *Luftwaffe* was yet another myth generated by the Fall of France. The Bloch 152, Dewoitine 520, and Curtiss Hawk fighters, not to mention the RAF Hurricane and soon to become legendary Spitfire, were every bit the equal of the renowned Me 109. Rather, German air superiority was achieved by *Luftwaffe* tactics that threw even reserve aircraft into mass strikes, while the Allies retained too many of their combat aircraft on air fields well to the rear or in Britain to preserve them, in keeping with their long war of attrition strategy.[134] But while Allied air tactics certainly proved ill-suited to parry the all-out *Luftwaffe* assault of May–June 1940, serious numerical disadvantages and technical deficiencies persisted in the French air force. France's inventory was heavy on fighters. But many "new" fighters were older models that the French continued to produce in the hope that later they could be retrofitted with more powerful engines. The Dewoitine 520 was still in prototype phase in the Phoney War, causing the French to rely on the 1937 Morane-Saulnier (MS) 406 fighter, outclassed by the Me 109E, the Curtiss H-75A, only slightly more agile than the MS 406, and the totally antiquated Dewoitine 510. French reconnaissance aircraft led by the Mureaux 115 were airborne artifacts, so slow that even the notoriously sluggish Stuka (Ju 87) might sprint past them.[135] The French air force was also handicapped by a severe shortage of experienced pilots and support personnel. But pilot attrition also became a problem in the *Luftwaffe* as the campaign advanced. And while the pre-war assumption was that the air force would support ground operations, the French lacked ground assault aircraft or a doctrine for their employment. Nor had they practiced air–ground support operations before the war. France's fighter command and anti-aircraft defense were grouped under the same inspectorate. As a consequence, neither was well served, especially as anti-aircraft defense was the province of the army, that manned it primarily with reservists. The French had some excellent anti-aircraft guns, and were even given some British radar systems. But they had only 1,200 guns, mostly 1897 model 75 mm pieces adapted for air defense, compared with 9,300 20, 37, and 88 mm pieces in the German inventory. French air defense was also hampered by a reliance on telephone communications run through the Post Office (PTT), which required everything short of depositing another "jeton" (token) in the coinbox to get an aircraft vector. This was a situation that Phoney War improvization could not repair.[136]

Rearmament and the Army

Crémieux-Brilhac insisted that France's industrial mobilization was a measured success, especially when compared with that of Germany, which encountered many of the same problems of crash rearmament and lack of raw materials as did France, but had surmounted them less successfully. Indeed, Germany's *Blitzoperationen* or *Blitzfeldzügen* (lightning war) concept, according to Frieser, evolved only gradually, and "signifies an attempt to turn strategic necessity into operational virtue against the background of shortages in economic resources."[137] By August 1939, a French armaments industry that had consisted of networks of small workshops with aging machine tools had been transformed into a modernizing industrial establishment able to produce enough tanks to organize three light mechanized divisions, four heavy armored divisions, 6,500 anti-tank guns, 7,000 mortars, and so on.[138] The problem with this more upbeat revisionist assessment is that there remained significant shortfalls both in quantity and in quality in France's military arsenal. Many of these "new" weapons were simply Great War upgrades and adaptations. Also, as de Gaulle pointed out, French rearmament merely served to reinforce an archaic military system rather than modernize and revitalize it.

As with the French air force, the modernization of the French army stumbled on the absence of a coherent doctrine, especially on the role of tanks in modern warfare. One view is that the mid 1930s found the French military "timid and unenterprising"[139] at the very moment when German rearmament accelerated. There is some truth to that accusation. Each arm tenaciously defended its doctrinal viewpoints and budgets. In semi-retirement, Pétain's dead hand limited military reform. France's First World War hero wrote the preface for General Louis Chauvineau's 1939 treatise *Une Invasion est-elle encore possible?* In the process, he gave the official blessing to Chauvineau's main argument that artillery, anti-tank guns, and mines offered an effective counter to independent tank divisions, whose claims for effectiveness owed more to Jules Verne than to Heinz Guderian. The problem with Chavineau's argument was that anti-tank guns and mines were poorly adapted to mobile warfare and in short supply in a French army incapable of organizing an effective counter to German mobile tactics. Daladier's *laissez-faire* approach to his ministerial duties and decentralized organization of rearmament, combined with Gamelin's placatory command style, failed to impel the French army's "feudal powers" to evolve an agreed role for tanks. But to be fair, motorization and mechanization met resistance in many armies in the 1930s, including the *Wehrmacht*, where Guderian's 1937 book *Achtung Panzer!* encountered similar skepticism.[140]

But as de Gaulle's *Vers l'armée de métier* testified, there was no shortage of reorganization schemes in the French army, nor ideas about how to coordinate land and air forces. Hardly had hostilities ceased in 1918 than debates flared in French ranks about the role of armor in modern combat. In 1919, General Jean-Baptiste Estienne, an innovative artillery general who had commanded tanks in 1917, proposed the creation of an "autonomous tank army" with accompanying infantry and artillery in tracked vehicles and with tactical air cover. As has been seen with de Gaulle's analysis, the spread of popular pacifism, the Third Republic's political muddle, and the cultural pessimism that gripped conservatives in France in the 1930s were reflected in the requirement for mechanization.

In systems of democratic civil–military relations, austerity combined with a sense of national decadence and peril within a total war culture typically generates military propagandists for a particular strategic ideal.[141] Not surprisingly, the politically reactionary Weygand had been in the modernization vanguard when he proposed the creation of seven motorized infantry divisions in October 1933. French tank production was hindered by many of the same problems that slowed air force modernization – bureaucratic disputes over prototypes; an antiquated, artisan-based industry lacking modern mass production techniques; and an absence of understanding of the larger economic requirements of armaments production among them.[142] In the 1930s, Generals Gaston Billotte and Pierre Héring were in the forefront of promoting the use of tanks in the French army. During his tenure of command from January 1930 until January 1935, Maxime Weygand had laid the foundation for a *Division* *légère mécanique* (DLM) built in 1938 around the SOMUA S35 tank, the French equivalent to the *Panzerkampfwagen* III (Pz.Kpfw. III), considered by many the best battlefield tank in 1940 because of its superior mobility, firepower, and armor.[143] In December 1938, the *Conseil supérieur de guerre* approved the creation of two heavy armored divisions (AD) called *Divisions cuirassées de réserve* (DCrs). Military reviews brimmed with articles on mechanization, motorization, and proposals for tank doctrine. The role of tanks was the subject of debates in the parliamentary army committee and the *Conseil supérieur de guerre*, and of lectures at the French War College.

When war broke out in 1939, France had one of the largest tank forces in the world. This was because from 1936, when it became obvious to everyone that the Germans could simply swing around the flank of the Maginot Line, the French army began to produce tanks in impressive numbers, many of them technically excellent. The rapid destruction of Poland revealed the utility of armor, so that by May 1940, the French order of battle counted three DLM and four DCrs uniting 960 of France's 2,900 tanks.[144] These included the 7^e *Division d'Infanterie Mecanisé* and the 2^e *Division Légère Mécanique*, both of which approximated a panzer division, as well as an armored group designed for breakthrough operations.[145]

The problem of the tank in the French army was that their tactical role remained a source of doctrinal contention among the different arms. Most armies came up with a main battle tank and built their doctrinal concepts around that – the Pz.Kpfw. III and IV for the *Wehrmacht*; the British Valentine; the American Sherman by 1942; and the Soviet T-34. However, given the fragmentation of the French high command with their entrenched loyalties to their respective arms and services, reinforced by the inability or unwillingness of Daladier and Gamelin to override the powers of the inspectors general, each arm developed its own prototype designed to fill a tactical niche. In 1936, Gamelin had proposed a light mechanized corps of three divisions, but the *Conseil supérieur de guerre* scaled back his concept by half, largely due to opposition by the Inspector General of Cavalry, Robert Altmayer, who argued that the horse still had a role to play on the modern battlefield, a retrograde but realistic view.[146] Those who, like de Gaulle, believed the tank to be a breakthrough weapon, favored a relatively robust *char de combat*, which in the French context translated into the Char B1bis and the various spin-offs like the SOMUA S35. The Char B1bis was a 31.5 ton colossus that carried thick armor, and packed a hull-mounted 75 mm gun and a 47 mm turret gun. The manufacturer Renault upgraded the engine to increase speed but neglected to enlarge

the fuel tank, which limited operations to five hours maximum. It was also difficult to maneuver as the tank commander had both to man the 47 mm gun and operate a radio. Only 162 of these *chars de combat* existed in 1939, organized in four battalions. De Gaulle's complaint was that these should have been grouped in independent divisions, an idea that was studied, even approved, but applied incrementally by Daladier, perpetually at sea in his ever-proliferating ministerial dossiers. Only 25 percent of French tanks were actually grouped in the armored divisions that were formed in January and April 1940.[147]

Unlike the *Wehrmacht*, which created a *Panzerwaffe*, the French army never fostered a true armored arm. French tanks had three problems, beginning with the fact that doctrine for the DCrs stipulated their use within a methodical battle concept.[148] Half of the French tanks were employed in an infantry support role. "In short, tanks should accompany the infantry, *but the infantry didn't know how to use them*," concluded a 1941 report. "Or they will embark upon the D.C.R.s (DCrs) whose organization and training was embryonic. Fantasy in the way they were commanded. Casualness and fantasy in the way the tanks were sometimes used was completely unjustified."[149] The DCrs' "late formation and lack of preparation was a direct consequence of the French army's inability to understand the extra dimension mobile armor added to the battlefield," concludes Robert Doughty.[150] The DCrs lacked adequate doctrine, matériel, logistical and mechanical support, and motorized infantry to support attacks, as de Gaulle's experience with the improvized 4^e DCr was to prove in May 1940. The army never massed tanks to achieve power and surprise in counterattacks, but was more likely to scatter them in blocking positions or to order sacrificial attacks by outnumbered and outgunned units. As a result, "improvization reigned."[151] The cavalry created its own version of an armored division in the *division légère mécanique de cavalerie* (DLM). But French methodical battle doctrine constrained their role, so that, "incapable of leading prescribed counterattacks, they found themselves rapidly tested, broken up, and reduced to infantry support," by an army obsessed with reconstructing solid fronts, concludes Gérard Saint-Martin.[152]

The three light armored divisions (DLMs) were to fight in front of or on the flanks of the main action, in *couverture* (frontier defense) and exploitation in the grand cavalry traditions. The infantry argued that their undertrained and vulnerable soldiers required a firepower upgrade. This referred back to Estienne's original idea that tanks best served as mobile artillery and tracked machinegun nests, a view, with the addition of engineers and "tank destroyers," not too far removed from the idea of "combat commands" developed in the US Army in the 1930s and imposed on the French army by the Americans in 1944–1945. Unfortunately, the technology failed to match the tactical vision, because it resulted in the mass production of the Renault R35, basically a Great War upgrade armed with a 37 mm gun that packed a pitiful punch. These were by far the most numerous tanks in the French inventory. Infantry tanks also proved to be slow, vulnerable when pitted against heavier German models, and scattered in penny packets across the battlefield. And like all French tanks of the era, they lacked radios, their radios were insufficiently powerful, or their radios worked only in receive mode. This meant that tactical movements were difficult to coordinate and intelligence could not be shared. A final problem was that the small gas tanks already mentioned, and the lack of a jerry can system like that developed by the Germans, limited their operational range. This was worsened by *Luftwaffe* dominance, which allowed German aircraft to target French supply convoys. Neither were French soldiers offered adequate time to train on tanks, nor were French generals educated on how to concentrate them to achieve maximum effect. Instead, they scattered them in independent battalions to be mauled by panzer divisions, for which the French tanks were a vulnerable prey, especially after they ran out of petrol.[153]

The Artillery

Not surprisingly, in the shadow of de Gaulle's prophetic *Vers l'armée de métier* and the Panzer triumphs of May–June 1940, scholarship on the French army in 1940 has tended to bypass the role of French artillery in the debacle. Since Napoleon at least, the artillery had been regarded as the French army's pride. That of 1940, however, had accumulated numerous deficiencies, beginning with the fact that most of its guns were of mothballed Great War vintage or design that lacked both range and mobility. French artillery officers criticized the nationalized French armaments industry for its inability to produce "interesting" guns such as the 20 mm Oerlikon, 25 mm Hotchkiss, 40 mm Bofors, 60 mm and 81 mm Brandt mortars, Schneider 105 mm 1936S, British 94 mm caliber 25 pounder, and so on.[154] But what French foundries did produce was interesting enough for the war that the French army intended to fight. Artillery doctrine was conceived for static warfare – distributing defensive barrages in front of the principle line of resistance from shallow strong-points, or supporting counterattacks, which in 1940 were easily broken up by *Luftwaffe* intervention and German artillery barrages.[155]

French heavy field pieces like the 105 mm and 155 mm guns had in common the fact that they were cumbersome, fragile, and lacked range.[156] They were also slow to reach the battlefield: "Our artillery suffered terribly from a lack of transport," Captain Tulous remembered in 1942. "For the most part, our heavy artillery was pulled by old tractors from the 14–18 war which could travel at 6–10 kmh .... The canons arrived with 1, 2, 3 days' delay ... Nine times out of ten, the Germans generally got there first."[157] Inadequate numbers of field pieces combined with their lack of range compromised artillery support, especially as divisional artillery in 1940 was tasked to cover fronts of 15–30 kilometers. To defend this much ground, groups had to be "articulated" – that is, broken up, dispersed, and hence in the process they became more difficult to coordinate because of poor French communications. In 1940, an artillery battery might be located up to 10 kilometers or more from its group command center – the *poste central de tir* (central fire control post or PCT). Nominally, the PCT filtered requests for fire support that came in via telephone, and allocated it according to what it determined to be the most lucrative or urgent targets. The PCT was the quintessential static front system, where terrain had been mapped, distances calculated, sounding devices had pinpointed enemy batteries, and spotter planes could issue warnings and corroborate fire support requests. In a war of movement fought over unfamiliar terrain for which maps were lacking, with the tactical situation constantly changing, where telephone wire had to be frequently unrolled and recovered lest it be lost, where French spotter planes became choice prey even for slow-moving Stukas, PCT control was guranteed to break down early and often.[158] The first problem was the phones, which, Captain Paul Gail complained, "were old and in poor condition. The distances between the group and the batteries were too far, which made laying double lines impossible. The lines were too fragile, and constantly cut by shells." As an example of the slow reaction time of this bureaucratized and overly layered system, on 31 May 1940 between 08:00 and 09:00, Gail, commander of an anti-tank battery with the 68^{e} DI, observed at 2 kilometers German infantry crossing the Bourbourg Canal at Dunkirk on boats with their mortars, "without being bothered by anyone." As his 75 mm guns lacked range, Gail requested an artillery strike by heavier batteries. "But it was only the next day that the 1st section of the 4th battery, at the request of the infantry and with the accord of the group commander, unleashed a barrage." By which time the Germans had long crossed the canal and moved on.[159]

Anti-tank guns, though better, also had their shortcomings. The 75 mm cannon had formed the backbone of the French artillery since the late 1890s. Rustic, serviceable, with a 1,200 meter range, able to fire four rounds a minute, by 1940 several generations of the 75 mm guns encumbered France's artillery inventory, where they had been demoted largely to an anti-tank and anti-aircraft defense role. While the more modern 47 mm and 25 mm anti-tank guns commanded a fan base, units generally were allotted only half the regulation number. Also, because of poor training and poor intelligence due largely to lack of radios, or failure to use them, these guns were too often positioned where Panzers could avoid them. While praised for its power and accuracy up to 800 meters, the 47 mm was cumbersome, slow to unlimber in a surprise attack or to displace to follow the battle. Its sites were constantly thrown out of alignment. But above all, a *division* was allocated only six of them![160] The 25 mm guns was effective against light tanks, but a shell fired by one of them simply ricocheted off the armor of Pz.Kpfw. IIIs and IVs unless by chance it struck just beneath the turret. Overall, the 25 mm gun was considered unstable and difficult to tow.[161] The fact that the medium and light artillery was largely horse drawn both devoured personnel and made it especially exposed: "Under air bombardment, horses escaped, became crazed, and made marvelous targets for assault aviation," read a post-1940 report. Tanks could move much faster than could the horse drawn 75 mm, 47 mm, and 25 mm cannons reposition to defend against them.[162] "Now, with thirty or so 75s and 47s for a ten-kilometer front, every (enemy) tank attack is bound to succeed," complained Gail.[163] While important for every arm, a preponderance of ill-trained reservists disproportionately affected a technical service like the artillery. Batteries staffed by a school master or the village *boulanger* were clueless about how to deploy for maximum effect. This especially impacted the combativeness of "B" divisions.[164]

A post-war report listed an absence of mortars, sub-machineguns and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA or, in French, DCA) as France's greatest deficiencies, together with a lack of tanks and air cover. Given the feebleness of the French air force, one would have thought that the question of air defense and radar would have been given a high priority in France as it was in Britain, even under appeaser-in-chief Neville Chamberlain. Instead, French AAA consisted mainly of 1,200 1897-model 75 mm canon on fixed mounts, incapable of hitting planes flying at 4,000 meters or above, or, in many infantry units, Hotchkiss machineguns. Documents prepared for the April 1942 Riom trials claimed that the army needed at a minimum 7,000 anti-aircraft guns in 1940. Nor, like anti-tank guns, did the AAA have sufficient munitions. This compared unfavorably with 9,300 German AAA batteries that included the redoubtable 88 mm guns. Newer model anti-aircraft guns were coming on line when war broke out. Not that they would have been used more efficiently: Franco-American and Stanford University alumnus Michel de Cazotte, designated anti-aircraft officer for his reserve infantry regiment, was dispatched on a course that consisted of three days' exposure to what were, even for an educated man whose specialty was finance, incomprehensible mathematical formulas. On his return, the best he could do was to show his fellow officers how to adjust the site of a Hotchkiss machine-gun pointed skyward, the only air defense allotted to his B division, made up principally of Breton peasants. "This, as ever, was a success, especially with the Artillery officers who, no doubt, had rarely to deal with anything so ridiculously small. Somehow I got through [my presentation]." But practice proved less successful: "Several weeks before (the German offensive), on the dunes near Dunkerque, a plane, flying slowly about 500 meters altitude, had drawn a target streamer back and forth above all the machine-guns of the regiment, [some fifty Hotchkiss guns, I guess] reunited, and all firing at once. Out of a thousand shots fired, I think only five or six reached the streamer. I had therefore but little confidence in the results that could be obtained by only one or two guns. Of course, there is such a thing as a lucky shot. It was certainly the duty of my D.C. A. unit to open fire nonetheless."[165]

Furthermore, control of AAA became a source of inter-service rancor. The French air force not only wanted to fly all aircraft. It also claimed a monopoly on shooting them down. A post-war letter complained that the army and the air force fought for control of the AAA like two divorcing parents squabbling over custody of their only child. As a result, the air defense troops became the army's waifs and strays, understrength, always on alert, and manned mainly by "the scrapings from the depots of every arm."[166] Here was another problem that Daladier should have prioritized but apparently neglected. For some French infantry units, air defense consisted of a pair of machineguns bolted together. Historians have generally concluded that the *Luftwaffe*'s air dominance was an important, but not decisive, element in France's defeat. But it is certain that being constantly strafed and bombed from the air, without the ability to reply, hardly bolstered French morale, nor that of the horses upon which they depended for mobility and logistics. "The absence of French anti-aircraft artillery had a very depressing effect on the morale of the troops [at Dunkirk]," Colonel Bernadin Raugel reported in the wake of the French surrender. Air attacks were particularly feared as French troops lacked picks and shovels to dig trenches.[167] As has been alluded to, a few bombs produced chaos in largely horse-drawn French supply convoys, severely disrupting logistics, contributing to the inability of the army to move artillery quickly to threatened sectors, and to a growing crisis of munitions and other logistical lacunae in front-line units. In the aftermath of defeat, the now largely grounded French air force grabbed control of air defense and turned it against Allied planes bombing targets in France.

Which is why the French army required radios, an item on which they spent barely 0.15 percent of their defense budget. French military opinion was hotly divided over the question of radios, as over most innovation. François Cochet attributes the French army's aversion to radios to two factors. The first was a "resistance to modernity" in an army that preferred the tried and true methods of runners, carrier pigeons, flares, or flags, even if tank commanders under fire had to stick their heads out of the turret to wiggle their pennants, and runners were nailed to the ground during artillery bombardments. The second was a concern for communications security, which bordered on a phobia.[168] Indeed, during the *drôle de guerre*, the army applied a radio blackout, because the high command did not want to reveal their order of battle to eavesdropping Germans. This especially riled the British, because the interdiction kept them from fully testing and adjusting their command-and-control system. Radios were treated as a backup system in case field phones or dispatch riders failed, which is precisely what happened in May–June 1940.[169] With French infantry and their supporting artillery spread out over extended fronts in 1940, it became difficult if not virtually impossible for even a battalion commander to control and maneuver his force in dynamic combat conditions, especially in broken terrain.[170]

And to be fair, a disappointing inventory of French army radios kept carrier pigeons in business – indeed, when a post-war report insisted that "the pigeon conserves its great utility," it was not referring to that bird's undoubted culinary properties.[171] A few radios got passing marks. But most French army radios were cumbersome, they lacked range, their batteries quickly depleted and were difficult to recharge, and they fritzed out with frustrating regularity. Transmission trucks festooned with large and visible antennae allowed the Germans through sight and radio direction finding (RDF) to pinpoint French regimental and division headquarters, around which clustered all sorts of ancillary services like telephones, field hospitals, supply depots, PCTs, and so on, which made them choice targets for artillery or Stukas.[172] For Second lieutenant Chevalier, radio offered "a weak and unpredictable solution that requires considerable personnel. The requirement to man it permanently is very fatiguing, but it is susceptible to considerable improvements."[173] The tradeoff, of course, was that a lack of radios "explains the vacuum of intelligence in which our infantry lived. It could transmit intelligence only with difficulty," read a post-war evaluation. "Neither the organization, nor the armament, nor the means of liaison were adapted to this form of (mobile) combat. *If one adds to this the frequent absence of intelligence on the enemy*, then we understand why our infantry was routed."[174]

Revisionists correctly warn against overstating an image of a backward French army pitted against a modern *Wehrmacht*, which Frieser describes in the spring of 1940 as a "semi-modern" force spearhead by an elite vanguard of 10 panzer and 6 motorized infantry divisions, behind which trudged 141 "rather old fashioned," poorly trained, largely horse mobile divisions armed "with inferior equipment."[175] Therefore, the argument continues, French failure cannot be pinned exclusively on a lack of modern weaponry and motorization that a "decadent" Republic failed to supply, although this certainly played a role. At the same time, it is not difficult to detect the portents of a German "strange victory," given that many French tactics, practices, and procedures were engraved in 1918 and largely unrevised in the face of the changing conditions of mobile warfare in the 1930s, which in turn shaped the type of armaments that the French military ordered, or maintained. By adopting a defensive strategy in keeping with their extended conflict scenario and controlled battle concept, the French amplified their weaknesses – they had to be strong everywhere, while an offensive-minded *Wehrmacht* could concentrate its most proficient elements against those French troops least prepared to withstand the shock of surprise and innovative methods.[176] The result was that a precipitous retreat in 1940 led to the rapid disorganization and disintegration of the army.

For these reasons, de Gaulle complained that the rearmament budget voted in 1936 merely "completed the existing system, it did not modify it."[177] Robert Frankenstein concluded that France's entire rearmament effort had served for naught. It disorganized France's industrial production, unsettled state finances, and delivered an inventory of poorly conceived, largely antiquated weapons to a French army that did not know how to employ them or, in the case of the navy, simply turned them against the Allies or sent them to the bottom of Toulon harbor.[178] "After spending billions and billions, the army mobilized without aviation, with few antitank guns, and not even able to provide complete uniforms for its personnel," complained a disgruntled reserve captain.[179] It may be argued that France's rearmament effort actually benefited Berlin more than the Allies – in the aftermath of defeat, German and Italian forces were allowed their pick of French tanks and planes, while French industry and skilled workers were harnessed to the Reich's war-making effort.

The French High Command

Upon assuming the portfolio of the air ministry in January 1938, Guy La Chambre had recognized multiple problems, beginning with the fact that the government did not have an overall national defense plan coordinated with the three services, with budget allocations to match. Nor did the French military have a coherent command structure able to define a national defense architecture and a joint services combat doctrine.[180] Blum had created a *Comité permanent de la Défense nationale* (CPDN) in June 1936, which helped to put some order into a disjointed defense policy-planning structure. A 1938 law directed that in wartime the general conduct of the war would be laid down by the cabinet and the *Comité supérieur de la Défense nationale* (CSDN). No supreme command existed in peacetime, and Daladier and Gamelin resisted efforts to create one because it might have short-circuited their extemporized *modus operandi*. In the meantime, the peacetime structure of the high command was less precise.

Rearmament fell under the purview of the CSDN, which answered to the premier, not to the minister of defense.[181] The fundamental problem of rearmament was closely tied to fragile French civil–military relations and to the evolution of Third Republican governance in the 1930s. The ascendant personalities who rose to prominence during the Great War and who dominated the post-war decade – Clemenceau, Barthou, Tardieu, Poincaré, Maginot, Leygues – gave way to a new generation of "system politicians" – political fixers able to maneuver within a complex multi-party system, exemplified by Daladier, Laval, Bonnet, Reynaud, and so on.[182] This contributed to drift and indecision in foreign and defense policy. While this does not let French officers off the hook, it certainly tests Philip Nord's assertion that the French military's operational and tactical dysfunction was somehow self-generated, unrelated to the political system that governed it and the society from which it sprung.[183]

War is certainly fought by armies, but also by societies, which impact each other in reciprocal ways. While it is certainly true that military organizations generate their own cultures, these are not unrelated to their political and social context, which determines the selection of the high command, the structure of the forces, funding, length of service time, disciplinary norms, even operational and tactical disposition. The Third Republic had evinced a distrust of strong, unified military leadership dating at least from Boulanger in 1889 and the Dreyfus affair at the turn of the twentieth century. As a consequence, the war and defense ministries were characterized by administrative muddle, petty intrigues, and a proliferation of bureaus and study groups whose role in producing a coherent vision of defense often went undefined. The corporate culture at the summit of the French military determined that, while senior officers groused in the mess about the Republic, they carefully cultivated influential politicians – indeed, had they not done so, they would never have arrived at senior rank. The labels of "right" or "left" were assigned in a French political context based on an officer's religious habits, offensive or defensive preferences, and party links. François Darlan's father had been a staunch republican, a Freemason, and served as minister of justice. This opened doors to influential political contacts and allowed him to run the navy as his private fiefdom through a patronage network known as *les Amis de Darlan* ("friends of Darlan," abbreviated as ADD). Throughout the 1930s, airmen and soldiers had been at daggers drawn over the independence of the French air force, air doctrine, and control of air defense. Like any bureaucracy, arms and services defended their interests and promoted their most articulate and talented officers to advocate for them. Budgets became battles for professional prominence, even survival.

At the top, the army high command separated into First World War legacy "houses," or satrapies of arms and services that defended their prerogatives, doctrinal concepts, weapons systems, and budgets with the tenacity of the Foreign Legion at Fort Zinderneuf. These fraternal networks were critical in promotions and assignments. "High French army circles remind one too often and too vividly of some club, or caste, insufficiently open to the outer world," opined Pertinax. "It can hardly be gainsaid that the officers trained by Joffre and Foch, and, to a lesser extent, those trained by Pétain, enjoyed, between 1920 and 1940, the privileges of a sort of apostolic succession. In practice, the ruling set in the Army was largely recruited by 'co-optation' under a self-perpetuating system, with all dissenters being deliberately hindered in their careers and persecuted."[184] American journalist A. J. Liebling confessed that reporting on French generals could be compared to "a hobby without apparent charm," like train spotting.[185]

Generals also acquired political labels based on their networks, connections, and religious habits. The cavalryman Weygand's professional reputation flowed from a belief that he was privy to the "secrets of Foch." His well merited status as "*de droite*" (right-wing) resulted from his pro-clerical opinions, his daily attendance at mass, his irascible and very public hostility to parliamentary oversight, his antisemitism, his obsession about communist conspiracies, and his preference for offensive warfare.[186] Because he was casual about his religious duties, was associated with the strategic defensive, and enjoyed a reputation for quelling the 1917 French army mutinies with understanding and restraint, Pétain was mistakenly believed to be safely republican. As a protégé of Joffre and Daladier's man, Gamelin was "de gauche," while his deputy and rival Georges was viewed as "de droite." First Army Group commander Billotte was close to the Radical Party, and so "de gauche."[187] De Gaulle had belonged to Pétain's circle until rusticated in 1938 for insubordinate behavior. Quite apart from the fact that he was a practicing Catholic, the modernization through mechanization proposed by de Gaulle challenged the republican *levée en masse*, because it incorporated military professionalization, mechanization, and strategies of preemption. The German Blitzkrieg offered an "optimization of force" that allied technocracy and ideology into a strategy of National Socialist warfare. It encouraged competitiveness in operational planning and risk taking on the battlefield that "fitted into a system that honored success in the pursuit of conquest."[188] France's *levée en masse* offered a system of civilian control built around infantry armies composed overwhelmingly of reservists, one that kept the high command on a short leash, discouraged operational adventurism, and circumscribed the escalation inherent in the German system. Modernization was seen as antithetical to casual Third Republic practices, whose imposition would require a much more authoritarian agenda and professional mindset.

In terms of their actual political outlook and disposition, all of these men could be categorized as conservatives, and their anxieties and rivalries were at root personal and professional rather than political. Nevertheless, as Paxton points out, the porous frontier between professional and political interests made the army's apolitical tradition a precarious one. Senior officers, their chiefs of staff and subordinates, were frequently obliged to play in the political arena for corporate or personal reasons. This history of having a hand in the formation of defense policy, central to the existence of the Republic and of France, combined with a view evident in de Gaulle's *Vers l'armée de métier* that defense policy was a mere extension of social policy. A melding of the professional with the political would facilitate, even put momentum behind, a shift of army support to Vichy. For these reasons, civilian control of the military in France had always been contingent, especially in the empire, where soldiers and governors, well out of view and quick to complain of the apathy or ignorance of Paris in imperial matters, had a habit of formulating their own rules.[189] As would be seen in June 1940, despite the solidly Republican and even Popular Front credentials of a number of senior generals, civil servants, imperial officials, and parliamentarians, few rallied to the Republic's defense.

However, in the run-up to war, this intermixing of corporate hierarchies and political connections merely served further to fragment the French military command, muddle coherent planning, and hinder the evolution of a realistic strategic vision with an operational doctrine to match. Arguments over strategy were folded into budget battles linked to domestic politics, which organs of mass persuasion spun as a clash between the ideals of military professionalism – *esprit de corps*, honor, the enduring principles of war – pitted against the requirement for "economies" and a democratic urge to circumscribe military pretention, ambition, and excess thorough austerity. In this atmosphere, strategy formulation could occur only in a negative sense. Finally, when combined with "methodical battle" doctrine, Gamelin's aloofness, a tradition of château generalship, and the "politicization" of the high command created an atmosphere of professional detachment at the top. The sense that the French army was administered rather than commanded filtered down the ranks. This discouraged initiative and any sense of "esprit tactique" on the battalion and company level.[190]

Civilian anxiety about the reactionary political opinions of the officer corps resurfaced as Weygand's tempestuous four-year tenure as army commander drew to a close in January 1935. The odds-on favorite to replace Weygand was Alphonse Georges, a man favored not only by the outgoing commander but also by the majority of the fifteen generals and marshals who peopled the *Conseil supérieur de guerre*. In Algiers in 1943, when Georges was brought in to strengthen the team of American-sponsored General Henri Giraud, both Robert Murphy, American Minister in North Africa in 1943, and his British counterpart, Harold Macmillan, were inclined to agree with de Gaulle's assessment that Georges was an aged reactionary who numbered among the French army's "great number of incompetent and outmoded officers."[191] But that view was colored in part by Georges' association with the defeat of 1940. In 1935, Georges was viewed as a "straight shooter" – "*Saint Jean bouche d'or* " became Foch's nickname for him, suggesting that while Georges could be depended upon to speak his mind, he was also something of a loose cannon. Gamelin complained that Georges "spoke loudly and often." But he, too, thought Georges honest until his deputy commander testified against him at Riom. "The double game is obviously a contagious disease," Gamelin concluded in a bitter reference to Vichy's post-war defense that its apparent collaboration with the Germans actually constituted a cleverly thought-out strategy of "resistance."[192] Pertinax believed that while Georges lacked Gamelin's intelligence, he possessed a better character, and was much more attuned to the need to incorporate aviation into French doctrine, to motorize, and to integrate armored divisions into the French order of battle than was Gamelin.[193] He was also considered safely "Republican," although he frequently complained of government weakness.[194] But the war minister in 1935 was Gamelin's good friend and classmate at the *Ecole supérieur de guerre* General Louis Maurin, an artillery officer who viewed calls for armored divisions as a nefarious plot to reduce the battlefield prominence of his *artiflots* – French military slang for "gun bunnies" and "twelve-mile snipers." Maurin chose Gamelin on the pretext that Georges was still suffering from the wound he had received in Marseilles in October 1934 while riding in a procession next to Alexander I of Yugoslavia and Foreign Minister Louis Barthou, both of whom died at the hands of a Bulgarian assassin.

While the appointment of Georges may not have changed the outcome in May–June 1940, it might have limited the dimensions of the catastrophe, Georges' biographer speculates, because Georges objected to the Dyle-Breda Plan imposed by Gamelin. Furthermore, unlike the Olympian and softly sycophantic Gamelin, Georges was genuinely popular in the army, and was also a good friend of Churchill. But even Georges' admirers were forced to concede that he was more respected as an administrator than as a strategic visionary. Georges' limitations included a lack of imagination, a relaxed command style, and a tendency to "conform with the mold and habits of military society," rather than fight his corner in the operational and strategic debates of the day. If Gamelin is to be believed, Daladier had no confidence in Georges because he had not commanded in battle, and wanted to replace him with First Army commander Gaston Billotte, an advocate for heavy tank divisions. But Gamelin convinced Daladier that to replace Georges as commander of the northeast theater would alienate Georges' many army friends. It proved a poor decision – in 1940, the stunning speed of German operations caught Georges completely by surprise to the point that he literally dissolved into tears.[195]

Gamelin's career had been nothing short of brilliant. From a military family with roots in Alsace and Lorraine, he had graduated *Major* – first – in his 1891 Saint-Cyr class, and a bare seven years later ranked runner-up in his class at the prestigious *École supérieur de guerre* whose alumni were destined to populate the army's senior ranks. As a member of French commander-in-chief Joseph Joffre's staff in 1914, Gamelin was cited as one of the major architects of the miraculous French victory on the Marne in September. His time as Joffre's aide-de-camp, that culminated in Joffre's removal as commander-in-chief at the end of 1916, taught Gamelin the value of nurturing political contacts. Unlike Weygand, who spent the entire war on Foch's staff, Gamelin served with distinction in the trenches of the Great War in charge of a battalion, then a brigade, and finally from April 1917 to the war's end at the head of the 11th Infantry Division. Post-war, he had quashed the Druze Revolt in the Levant in 1925–1927. He returned to a corps command in France and subsequently ran the Army general staff when Weygand was promoted Inspector General of the army in 1931. However, relations between the two men quickly deteriorated with the 1932 victory of the "enlightened internationalists" of the Cartel des Gauches. While Weygand's fabled feuds with the government were well advertised, Gamelin sought to sooth and temporize with left-of-center politicians like the socialist Joseph Paul-Boncour and Radical Maurice Sarraut. At the same time, he had to unite the French armed forces riven by inter-arm, inter-service, and personal rivalries in the face of a deteriorating international security environment, sclerotic budgets, and a parade of left-leaning governments led by men whom the vast majority of officers viewed as at best pale patriots, if not outright traitors.[196]

While Blum found Gamelin "intelligent but limited," his commander-in-chief helped to quiet an officer corps profoundly disturbed by the Popular Front's support of the Spanish Republic and the diplomatic outreach under the influence of Pierre Cot and Yvon Delbos toward Eastern Europe. Gamelin also quietly prepared a military response lest the explosion of factory strikes of May–June 1936 that greeted the Popular Front election turn insurrectionary, revealing a paranoia about the working class that contributed to the decision for armistice in 1940 and bled into military distrust of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI) and *l'amalgame* in 1944–1945.[197] In the process, Gamelin acquired the reputation of an unexciting but reliably "Republican" general who was adroit, nuanced, prudent, conciliatory, and pragmatic, sometimes to the point of sacrificing principle to expediency.[198] After Gamelin lost the battle for France, it became almost mandatory in retrospect to log an unflattering verdict. Fonvieille-Alquier complained that Gamelin's "lack of dash, his nervous jump and blinking eyes when the flash of the photographer's bulb was near to him, his awkwardness when he reviewed some unit or decorated one of his subordinates in front of the troops ..." made him resemble "a civilian dressed up as a soldier." His "fixed determination not to annoy and never to displease" might have made him a notable chief of staff under a dynamic commander.[199] Others agreed that while Gamelin projected the image of the self-effacing bureaucratic operator, he seldom made eye contact in meetings, while rubbing his hands together as if devising alibis and building escape clauses into every proposition so as not to compromise himself.[200] British General Edmund Ironside, who met Gamelin during the Phoney War, was surprised by his dyed hair and frustrated by his complacency, his wishful thinking that the German population would overthrow Hitler, and his stubborn reluctance to initiate combat.[201] In the autumn of 1939, A. J. Liebling interviewed the diminutive, rosy-cheeked French commander with his "Flemish head" and an optimistically upturned white moustache. The décor in Joffre's old study in the *École Militaire* which served Gamelin as an in-town office was straight-up Petit Trianon. After listening to Gamelin's confident bromides about French military preparedness, Liebling concluded that the French commander-in-chief seemed "like a somnambulist jauntily strolling off a roof."[202] André Beaufre, who served on Gamelin's staff in 1939–1940, found his commander uncommunicative, a "little man … more professor than general, manifestly out of his depth," a temporizer who found it difficult to take the most simple decision.[203]

Gamelin's biographer, Martin Alexander, insists correctly that the French commander-in-chief has shouldered the burden of a defeat that should be more widely distributed. Gamelin's achievement was that he had helped to guide French rearmament and craft a long-war strategy against the Axis that, as the revisionist argument goes, plotted a strategic course that would eventually result in an Allied victory. Nor should the fact that Gamelin was not a "fighting commander" be held against him. Rather, the argument goes, Gamelin may be viewed as someone who was in the vanguard of the emergence of the strategic chief-of-staff with a firm grasp of the political dimensions of conflict, a category of senior leader who would come to the fore in the Second World War.[204] The counter-argument is that Gamelin was no Marshall, a man firmly in command of the US Army who had the full confidence of Franklin Roosevelt, with his little black notebook in which he wrote down names of talented officers to promote like Dwight Eisenhower. Nor was he an Allen Brooke, King, Dill, or Portal, solid characters all in the *avant garde* of modern pol-mil command trends who served strong political leaders who understood how to deploy a military instrument to political effect. Rather, Gamelin was the product of an older tradition of French political culture prevalent in an insecure Republic where memories of Bonapartism, Boulangism, and a soon-to-be-realized resurrection of the anti-Dreyfusards at Vichy set French civil–military relations on edge. But if the old adage holds that a nation gets the generals it deserves, Gamelin was perfectly suited to the mature Third Republic. His diffidence toward politicians sought to allay suspicion and insulate the army against political meddling. The flip side was that he proved to be a weak commander who never gripped his army, and never curtailed the power of the innovation-resistant arms inspectors, channeled the armored debates toward resolution, or forced a cohesive doctrine upon the army. While responsibility for the defeat of 1940 may have been widely shared, and the Maginot Line was something that, for better or worse, he inherited, the Dyle–Breda Plan was Gamelin's baby. Nor did he take the elementary precaution of maintaining a strategic reserve that might have staunched the German breakthrough at Sedan long enough for the French to stabilize the situation.

However, in Alexander's eyes, Gamelin's real shortcoming lay with his failure "in transforming or sufficiently remodeling the ideology of the French military cast." For in May–June 1940, the *Wehrmacht* merely galvanized a French civil–military crisis that permitted Pétain and Weygand, joined by "the nation's military and administrative elites," to back-stab the Republic.[205] Unfortunately, how Gamelin was to effect this change in the French military's stubbornly anti-republican culture with its deep-rooted sense of grievance is unclear. First, Gamelin represented the quintessential French military insider, a man comfortable in a pol-mil arrangement that had rewarded him handsomely. This in itself made him an unlikely candidate to spearhead a radical remodeling of French military culture. Second, attempts to make the army officer corps more "Republican" before the First World War by manipulating promotion to favor Masons and non-practicing Catholics had served only to foster division, resentment, demoralization, and a public backlash.[206] As has been seen, Cot's attempts simply to retire 400 superannuated air force officers provoked a tsunami of protest and accusations of political favoritism in a freshly created service that lacked the antiquity, entrenched traditions, or customs of the French army, but which subsumed in full measure the French military's wariness of the left and resentment at civilian meddling. After November 1942, the CFLN/GPRF, followed by the Fourth Republic, discovered that purges of compromised officers from the French military or police were checked by the need for commanders, technicians, and gendarmes to keep order in France and secure the empire. Staging a successful campaign to "republicanize" the armed forces in the polarized environment of the 1930s, in the face of German rearmament, with conservatives vocal in parliament and in the press, would have further roiled French civil–military relations at a critical period in France's rearmament effort.

Given these conditions, Gamelin sought to manage French civil–military relations rather than reorder them. He became the ideal commander-in-chief for the "system politicians" of the late 1930s, above all Daladier, who had no confidence that France alone could contain Hitler and who feared with justification that the Republic's soldiers might slip the leash of civilian control. American historian Ernest May surmised that Gamelin spent so much time massaging the insecurities of the Third Republic politicians that he paid too little attention to the Germans, a charge that Alexander believes exaggerated. But it is clear that Gamelin's pessimistic appraisals motivated in large part by his desire to keep his long-term rearmament strategy on track stamped a military imprimatur onto the politicians' disinclination to act.[207]

The revisionist attempt to shift the blame entirely onto military shoulders and so exonerate the Republic's role in the debacle overlooks the complexity of France's civil–military arrangement. A January 1938 decree named Gamelin Chief of Staff of National Defense, a high-sounding title that in fact carried only a small staff and no power to "command" the three services, only the ability to "coordinate" budgets, procurement, training, promotion, and peacetime policies at the behest of the *Comité de guerre*. This continued a command vacuum at the top of the services that Reynaud had condemned in 1936 when he called the position of French commander-in-chief "a label stuck on an empty bottle."[208] Williamson Murray and Alan Millett called the French high command "a nightmare organization" with little control and no coherent program.[209] But even if it did little to modernize French defense, this organization suited both the Third Republic's politicians and the service barons. When Gamelin was named Chief of the General Staff of National Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Land Forces, he claimed to have asked what powers exactly did this entail, only to receive evasive answers. The navy and air force committees in parliament opposed extending the chief of the general staff's authority over their services, while no one wanted to strengthen Daladier's position by ceding too many powers to his acolyte.[210] But it soon became clear that while French soldiers complained bitterly about the dispersion of command authority imposed by a paranoid Republic, the men on horseback managed to concoct their own bureaucratic impediments based on personal animosities or inter-arm rivalries.

Gamelin was flanked by two deputies – Georges was deputy commander-in-chief designated to direct "the north-eastern theater of operations" on the outbreak of war, while Louis Colson operated as Army chief of staff. Henri Dutailly notes that this command "triumvirate" might have worked had it operated as a team. But this was the French army, after all, where it was said that lieutenants are friends, captains are comrades, majors are colleagues, colonels are rivals, and generals are enemies.[211] Gamelin's "assistants" had been installed, mainly at the machinations of Weygand, as a check on command authority. Ever the consummate bureaucratic politician, Gamelin found workarounds. The French commander refused to allow his deputy Georges to choose his own staff, and busied him initially with a rewrite of doctrine. The result was the "*Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités*" of 12 August 1936. It was criticized post-war as too defensive, out of touch with modern combat procedures, heavy on motorized reserves and anti-tank guns, both in short supply in the French army of 1940, but light on air support and armored units.

Declared "*chargé de mission,*" Georges was also dispatched to carry out inspections of this and that, often in the colonies, which kept him absent from Paris for long periods. These peripheral tasks intentionally assigned by Gamelin kept Georges on the road and little prepared him for his role as wartime theater commander. This was especially worrying as, wounded in 1914, Georges had spent the remainder of the Great War serving on the staffs, first of General Maurice Sarrail, who commanded the Balkan front from Salonika, and then on Foch's staff, rather than in combat commands.[212]

As Army chief-of-staff, the French army's principal evangelist of the Maginot Line and of defensive strategy, and a bitter opponent of a Soviet alliance, Colson stifled Gamelin's admittedly fitful flashes of initiative or imagination.[213] The French commander-in-chief's power was further diffused in a myriad of committees and staffs. While Georges recognized the need for armored units and to bring the three services under a single authority, one consequence of this intentionally diffuse French command system was that no single vision for the "Air–Land Battle" evolved, because the *Comité de guerre*, responsible for coordinating the three services, remained remiss in its duties. Gamelin complained that decisions were taken in cabinet or in obscure, often ad hoc, committees that kept no minutes – a standard practice in Third Republic governance that included the cabinet – without input from the general staff. Georges was aggrieved that Gamelin neglected to consult him on many of the major defense decisions.[214] The *Comité de guerre* and the *Comité permanent de Défense nationale* failed to articulate goals and define the powers of command. The services seldom consulted with each other, or with the Quai.

Inter-service rivalries were also sharp. According to Pertinax, Gamelin "exasperated" navy chief François Darlan, "and the Admiral never missed an opportunity to do the General a bad turn."[215] In any case, the proud admirals cracking lobster claws in their ward rooms, sheltered by a powerful parliamentary lobby, and under the iron thumb of Darlan, "hardly a man bothered by scruples," had no intention of taking orders from a five-foot, four-inch-tall trench digger with dyed hair.[216] Not only was the navy's sense of inter-service superiority secured by the technological conceit that de Gaulle was keen to appropriate for his *armée de métier*, but also this sense of exclusivity was heightened by the fact that the naval officer corps was dominated by the devout progeny of the provincial aristocracy, or families with aristocratic pretentions, recruited heavily from France's conservative Atlantic seaboard. From the moment they entered *l'École navale* – nicknamed *la Borda* after the series of ships so named and anchored in Brest harbor that had served as the original

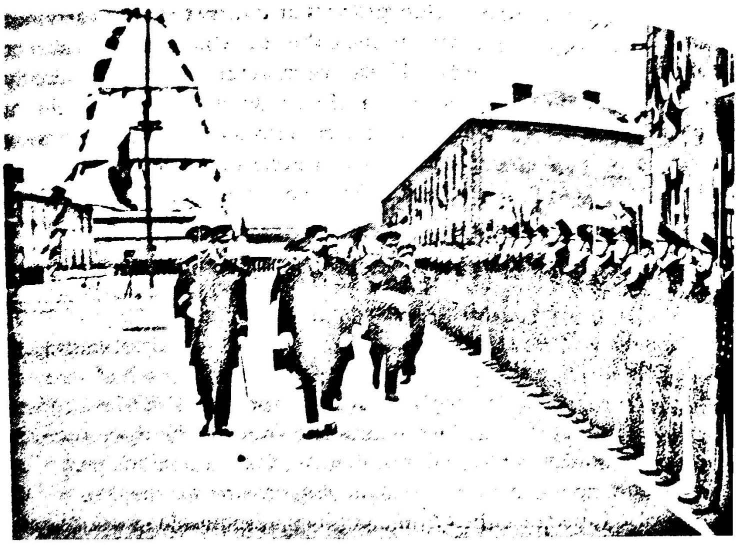

Figure 1.3 November 1930. The Minister of the Navy reviews cadets of the French naval academy in Brest "where a confusion is deliberately maintained between a professional and a spiritual elite."

school – naval cadets were inculcated with the idea that they belonged to "a scholarly, and soon to be military aristocracy." As Thomas Vaisset notes: "This instruction finds its natural extension on religious grounds where a confusion is deliberately maintained between a professional and a spiritual elite. [The academy's commandant is called the "Pope."] The junction between the two operates in the ethical domain, especially around 'the morals of duty [that] furnish the link between religious and secular morality.'" (Figure 1.3).[217]

From there, it was a small step to view naval service as a religious vocation, and the man-o'-war as a sort of iron friary adrift in the sea's immensity. "It's the separation from land, the union of everyone from the commander to the lowest sailor, to reach for the same goal." This marriage of machine and monastery, the synergy between technology and spirituality, provided the classic interface between naval service and Catholicism, "because it allowed the exaltation of an ethic founded on selflessness, the cult of obedience, and service as the pinnacle of sacrifice." Service to France under God's watchful eye coupled the anchor inexorably with the cross. La Borda reinforced a very "Catholic-centric" concept of French identity taught in parochial schools, in which "eternal France" transcended the Republic. "Civism and Catholicism formed the basis of the social relationship."[218] This paved the way for the so-called "admiralization" of Vichy, when Cardinal Liénard, Bishop of Lille, famously quipped during the occupation that he feared he might soon be replaced by an admiral.[219]

This nautical narcissism was popularized by the inter-war writings of Commandant Paul Chack, who divided the world into "the living, the dead, and those who go to sea." French naval officers reveled in an imagined moral and spiritual ascendency conferred by lives lived in a pure medium, sheltered from the corrupting influences of politics and civilization, which they left behind when they cast off. This institutional self-righteousness seemed harmless enough so long as it remained confined to the bridge and la Borda passing out parades. But with the collapse of the Republic, these views, exaggerated and radicalized by the social and professional isolation of the inter-war years and the conviction that the navy endured as the last repository of France's moral and spiritual values that made sailors superior to the decadent citizens they defended, were to have political consequences. During the Occupation, French naval officers felt that, as one of the few healthy elements in French society, they must seize the wheelhouse of France's renewal through the National Revolution. But with little real-world experience, they tended to view political leadership as being akin to shouting orders from the bridge in a storm, to a crew drilled instantly to obey. For these reasons, naval officers were to become what Jean-Baptist Bruneau calls the sorcerer's apprentices of Vichy.[220]

In this atmosphere of bureaucratic muddle, political rancor, and the French military's condescending sense of moral superiority, "civilian control of the military" was a qualified term. Daladier's elusive bonhomie suggested that he was distracted by issues far removed from national defense, and unwilling or powerless to break down armed service parochialism. As Lord of Defense Improvization, Gamelin was harried, rushing from meeting to meeting.[221] The British attaché reported that France's MOD was just a glorified "committee" that merely "coordinated solutions of certain definite problems." Alexander notes that this convoluted and improvized command structure handed sweeping responsibilities to the French commander-in-chief while it hobbled his powers to execute them.[222]

Conclusion

As international conditions in Europe grew more complex, France was in a poor posture to surmount them. In the front line against a populous, powerful, and rearming Germany, led by the bombastic and belligerent Hitler, Paris' most obvious international option was to revive the pre-1914 alliance with Russia. However, although ratified, the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact of May 1935 was never applied for a variety of reasons: the death of Louis Barthou who had negotiated it; suspicion of Stalin and the PCF – "the party of a foreign power" – on the right and in military circles; the Moscow purges which allowed those opposed to a Soviet alliance to argue that it was militarily worthless, especially as the smaller Eastern European powers would never allow Soviet troops on their territory; and the preference in the Quai to seek a détente with Germany, or an alliance with Great Britain, rather than to trust Stalin, who admittedly was entirely untrustworthy as the August 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was to prove.[223] Gamelin's strategy was to build up an impregnable defense of the Hexagon, mount an economic blockade of Germany, and fight a war on the periphery – *la guerre ailleurs* – until the enemy was enfeebled and the Allies had amassed enough military power to take the offensive.[224] This left as potential alliance partners a constellation of quarreling Eastern European nations, or Great Britain, in the hands of conservatives whose policy until 1938 was one of "limited liability" in a continental conflict.[225]

This situation required France to rely at least initially on its own military forces. One of the arguments of post-war historians was that the Third Republic, and in particular the Popular Front, did little to shore up French defense. In fact, that was not true. The Maginot Line had been constructed to assuage civilian anxiety to protect the northeastern frontier, not because the French army stood unanimously behind it.[226] And while the Maginot Line had absorbed a large share of the defense budget in the 1930s, the Popular Front had expended a great deal of money to modernize the French air force and create one of the world's largest tank armies, despite the risk of capital flight, inflation, and the sacrifice of much of the social agenda of the French left. But defense modernization hit two snags. The first was a lack of government-directed coordination, which joined outmoded plant and industrial practices to put ambitious production quotas out of reach. The second was that this armament upgrade was bestowed on a multifaceted, Balkanized military organization whose leadership lacked a coherent defense vision for inter-arm and inter-service cooperation. Yet, after two years spent at the French staff college, Major Ralph C. Smith reported to his US superiors in August 1937, that:

> the French military doctrine is essentially conservative ... in harmony with the national policy as a nation that does not seek territorial expansion but desires to preserve what it has and to maintain the status-quo ... the situation that is ever uppermost in their minds is an attack on their territory by Germany ... After two years close contact with their methods, I feel that they have a good army, trained in a system that is adapted to their needs. Their doctrine is not suitable in its entirety for American purposes. But I think we can profitably consider their respect for the defensive power of an enemy in position.[227]

It was with a military force that was modernizing, in a piecemeal and improvized way, that France plunged into war.